NO OTHER TIGER

A. E. W. MASON

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BY

A. E. W. MASON

AUTHOR OF
THE PRISONER IN THE OPAL,
THE FOUR FEATHERS, ETC.

"No other Tiger passed that way that night."—Chap. 3.

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NO OTHER TIGER

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NO OTHER TIGER

CHAPTER ONE: *A Deliberate Man*

THERE is a rough truth, no doubt, in the saying that adventures occur to the adventurous. But fantastic things may happen to any one. No man, for instance, was ever less fantastically-minded than Lieutenant-Colonel John Strickland, late of the Coldstream Guards. He disembarked from the river steamer at Thabeikyin and motored by the jungle road over the mountains to the Burma Ruby Mines at Mogok with the simple romantic wish to buy a jewel for a lady. Yet in that remote spot, during the sixty hours of his stay, the first fantastic incident happened to him, of a whole series which was to reach out across the oceans and accomplish itself in the fever of lighted cities.

He reached the Guest-House on the slope above the town by midday, ate his luncheon, and, with a Burma cheroot between his teeth, disposed himself on a long chair for a peaceful afternoon. There was, however, to be no peace for him. For, sprung apparently from the earth, three native hawkers were immediately squatting upon the veranda at his feet and flashing at him trays full of tiny stones—splinters of sapphire and ruby, fragments of amethyst and topaz, infinitesimal tourmalines and spinels, the refuse of the ruby mines. Strickland declined their wares, at first politely, then with violence. But pertinacity was their real stock-in-trade. They sold peace rather than jewels; and they merely retired a few yards down the sloping garden, where once more they squatted side by side, patient as vultures about a victim not quiet dead.

Strickland closed his eyes again and the latch of the gate at the bottom of the garden clicked. An officer in a

uniform, of a solid build and a stolid face, with a small bristling moustache upon his lip, walked up the path between the carefully-tended beds of flowers. He mounted the steps to the veranda and saluted.

"I beg to introduce myself, sir," he said in a formal voice. "I am Captain Thorne, District Superintendent of Police."

Colonel Strickland sat up straight and bowed. Whatever annoyance he felt, he concealed.

"It is kind of you to call," he said. "Won't you sit down, though, to be sure, you are rather the host than I!"

"Not at all," said Captain Thorne. But he sat down and removed his topee. After that there was silence. Strickland broke it. He held out a box of cigarettes.

"Will you smoke one?"

"Thank you; I'll smoke a pipe."

The Colonel with difficulty repressed a sigh. He began to calculate how many cigarettes went to a pipe in point of time—one certainly whilst the pipe was being loaded and lit. Captain Thorne was thirty-five years old, but he had all the deliberation of an old man.

"You walked into Bhamo two days ago," he said at length.

"I crossed the hills from Yunnan," replied Strickland.

"Yes," said Thorne.

"Yes," repeated Strickland; and once more silence encompassed the two men. Thorne looked out into the garden. Responsibility sat upon his shoulders like a knapsack. Strickland could almost see it—the knapsack of a man in full marching kit. Thorne slowly turned his eyes from the garden to Strickland's face and tried again:

"You have been walking for fifteen months in China."

"Yes."

"You told my colleague in Bhamo that."

"I did."

"It's a long time."

"I was up to no harm," said Strickland meekly.

"Of course not," said Thorne quite seriously.

"No."

"No," repeated Thorne; and once more silence came down like a blanket; and once more Thorne's eyes reverted to the garden, whilst behind a blank expression he revolved some weighty question. His trouble was that all questions, however small, to him were weighty and must be deviously approached. He was Strickland's visitor, because he wanted Strickland's help, but it was not in his nature to ask for it until he was satisfied by a veritable inquisition.

"Shooting?" he asked.

Strickland shrugged his shoulders.

"If it came my way. I had a gun and a sporting Mannlicher with me."

Thorne was clearly disappointed.

"You were making maps, then?"

"I made a few," Strickland returned. "But I had no commission to make any."

"No?" said Thorne.

"No," Strickland repeated.

The dejection of the District Superintendent was now complete. But he made a last and an audacious inquiry to determine definitely that this was not the man he wanted. He twisted a little in his chair and blurted out:

"Colonel Strickland, will you forgive me an impertinence?"

Colonel Strickland fixed a cold and steady eye upon his uncomfortable visitor.

"I should think not," he said quietly.

Captain Thorne, however, only twisted in his chair a little more.

"I must risk it nevertheless," he said stubbornly. "Isn't it a little odd that a man as young as you are, with your position, your appearance—some money, too, no doubt—with, in a word, all the enjoyments which the war has left

at your hand, should go tramping about on foot in the wastes of the earth with one or two natives for servants, and an outfit which a native trader would despise? Isn't it rather odd?"

The question was an impertinence, but it was put without an impertinent intention. Thorne's voice had an apologetic timidity; his manner was deferential. Yet Strickland's colour deepened all over his sun-tanned face and he was very slow to reply.

There were none the less twenty reasons which he could have given off-hand, each one of which held some grain of truth. A strain of the gipsy in his blood; the time-limit of his command when he was still too young for retirement; the loss of his friends; an aching sense of boredom; a feeling that he and his contemporaries were in the way of the busy flamboyant armies of young people who were so convinced that their elders had made a dreadful hash of their own epoch; a cynical inclination to stand aside and observe whether the new generation would do any better—any of these would have sufficed. But the real ultimate reason, the *causa causans* of his wandering —no, he would give that to no one.

He chose in the end yet another reason, and that, too, had its share of truth.

"I am not the only one, even of my own regiment, who has gone walking," he said, and then cited the names of several. "One of them, indeed, died not so long ago over in Yunnan."

"I remember," said Thorne.

"Well, we have all one thing in common," continued Strickland. "Ordinarily, amongst the life interests of the people you have described, people like myself, an enormous place is occupied by the horse. Horses keep half the country houses open and make the very best of summers just a pleasant overture to the winter, isn't that so?"

"I suppose it is," said Thorne in that tone of surprise with which a fresh idea is received.

"The one thing we all have in common," Strickland continued, "is that none of us is fond of a horse."

Thorne accepted the reason. He asked no more questions. A look of gloom settled upon his face. This last explanation alone was enough to persuade him that Strickland was not the man, nor belonged to the family of the man, of whom he stood in need.

"I am sorry," he said as he knocked out his pipe. "When they telegraphed to me from Bhamo that you had started down the Irawaddy, I hoped against hope that you would disembark at Thabeikyin and come up to Mogok."

"Well, so I did!" exclaimed Strickland.

"And that you would come with a particular object."

"So I did," Strickland repeated, but this time with a smile of amusement. He had never been able to take the hush-hush men seriously. The war had developed them by brigades and divisions, as a bacteriologist multiplies microbes—the men who would never ask you out to dinner until by devious questions they had found out whether you could accept, the man who talked of "particular objects," and twisted commonplaces into mysteries. Here was one of the very aces of the tribe.

"So I did. I came up to Mogok to buy a ruby." And, had Thorne been a close observer, he would have seen the blood once more darken Colonel Strickland's forehead. But he had no eyes for such details.

He rose from his chair with an air of finality, and took up his hat and his stick.

"No doubt you will get what you want at the office. I am sorry to have troubled you. Good morning!"

Captain Thorne was actually going. But this unceremonious departure was too much even for Strickland's equanimity. Thorne's foot was on the first of the steps down from the veranda, when a totally new and unexpected voice brought him to a stop.

"That won't do, Captain Thorne."

The voice was Colonel Strickland's. It was calm and pitched in a low key, but is was resonant with a quite compelling authority. Thorne's disdain vanished at the mere sound of it. He turned.

"Sit down again," said Strickland, and he pointed with a finger to the chair from which Thorne had risen. The Head of the Mogok police obeyed—slowly, not because he had a thought to disobey, but because he needed a moment or two to revise his judgments. After all, Colonel Strickland had commanded great bodies of men. A brigade during the last year of the war had been under his command, whilst he himself, Thorne, had never had more to deal with than a company.

"You asked me a moment ago to forgive you an impertinence," said Strickland quietly, as soon as Thorne was seated. "That was all very well. I forgave it. But you have taken it upon yourself to ask me a great many questions, and I certainly will not put up with the impertinence of your departure before you explain to me why you put them."

Thorne looked curiously at his inquisitor. He laid his hat and stick again on the table at his side. The relation in which the two men stood to each other was completely reversed, and by nothing more than the habit of authority in a voice.

"I was in the wrong, sir," he agreed, and he speculated whether he had not been as wrong in his judgment as in his manners. After all, this might be the man he wanted.

"I hoped that you had been hunting big game during these fifteen months," he explained. "I hoped that you had landed at Thabeikyin and come up to Mogok to look for big game about here."

Thereupon he told his need. Behind the Dâk-bungalow stretched a continent of jungle, dotted sparsely with villages. One of these villages, no more distant than a four hours' march from Mogok, was suffering from the depredations of a tiger, was actually in a state of siege.

A buffalo and other cattle had been eaten, a woman on the outskirts of the village had been carried off in broad daylight, a man had been dragged out of his hut and killed during the night.

"The village is in a panic," Thorne continued. "It has sent in a deputation to ask us what about it. But we are in a difficulty. The Forest Officers are a long way off upon their duties. I am tied to mine here. And though there's a famous hunter in the service of the mines, he's lying down there"—Thorne pointed to a white house on their left at the foot of the hill—"with a broken leg. So, you see, I was hoping that you would prove a godsend to us, and go out and deal with the brute."

Strickland stared at his visitor and gasped.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have been putting all these questions to me about my life and its object to discover whether you think me worthy to go out and shoot a tiger for you?" he cried indignantly. "I wonder you didn't want to know whether I had been at Eton."

"No, no, sir, that wasn't necessary," Thorne returned gravely. He was now neither impertinent nor abashed. Indeed, he felt himself to be once more upon equal terms with the guest of the bungalow. "You would never have been surprised at my questions, sir, if you had once sat out alone all through a long night on the branch of a tree in the heart of the jungle, waiting for a man-eating tiger. You would have known that a night alone in a haunted house could not put your nerves to a greater strain."

Captain Thorne was very much in earnest. A metaphor so picturesque coming from his unimaginative lips startled Strickland a little, awakened his curiosity and something more than his curiosity—the combative instinct in him.

"I certainly have had no such experience," he said. "But I could borrow a rifle, I suppose?"

Thorne looked Strickland doubtfully over from head

to foot. Strickland was slim, no more than of the middle height, a little under it perhaps—nimble in his movements, built for endurance, no doubt. But the face was perhaps a little too fine, the eyes, in repose, a little too brooding for the ordeal. There was an aloofness, a look of the mystical about him—that look which is the mark of lonely men—and one of Thorne's practical and gregarious stamp could not but distrust it. On the other hand there was Strickland's record . . . yes, that was not to be forgotten.

Thorne rose abruptly. He nodded in the direction of the white house at the foot of the hill.

"Let us go down and talk to Wingrove," he said. "He is not in pain now and can see us."

The two men walked down to the famous hunter's bungalow.

CHAPTER TWO: *The Bird, the Cat and——*

WINGROVE, a blond giant of a man, received them in an upstairs room, where he lay in bed with a cradle lifting the bedclothes from his broken leg. He was propped against a heap of pillows, his face and head showing up against the white linen like a gigantic orange, and he was reading with the concentration of a student the latest issue of *The Sporting Times* obtainable in Mogok. He dropped his newspaper as his visitors were shown into the room and ordered chairs to be set for them by the bed.

"So you are going to help us, Colonel Strickland?" he said. "We shall be very grateful, I can assure you."

"But I don't know that he's going to help us," Thorne rejoined. "We have come to you to advise us."

Wingrove looked from one to the other of his visitors.

"What's the difficulty? If it's a rifle, I have a .470 Rigby, which is at Colonel Strickland's disposal."

"Thank you," said Strickland with a smile. He was quite willing to let Thorne argue. He had not a doubt that Wingrove and he could, and would, arrange the expedition between them before he left the house.

"But the rifle isn't the difficulty at all," cried Thorne, and he explained that Strickland had had no experience at all. "I am putting the worst of it, of course, Wingrove, because I want him to go, if it's fair to let him go."

Strickland had slept out, no doubt, in the strangest places; he had been alone, no doubt, under the most exacting conditions. But this one thing he had not done. He had not sat up in a tree, absolutely by himself, through a whole night, waiting for a tiger in the depths of a jungle.

"It's a nerve-racking business when you're one of a

party. But alone! The first time! What have you got to say to that?"

Wingrove's face really made words unnecessary. It grew very grave and doubtful. Strickland was provoked by it to a flippancy which he regretted before he had completed its utterance. For these two men, both of them armed with knowledge, were weighing him in the balance. He felt suddenly as though he were a small boy before a board of examiners. But, above all, he felt an intense curiosity. He must know, by experience, what sort of a test this ordeal about which they were all so grave might be. Thorne had spoken of a night in a haunted house. Within a minute Strickland had yet another image and parallel to put beside that.

"I can't see what risk there can be, unless I fall asleep and tumble off my branch," he said lightly.

Wingrove shook his head and let it fall back against the pillows.

"You won't do that, Colonel Strickland," he answered softly. "No, there's not the slightest fear of it."

He remained for a few moments silent, with his eyes closed. Then he opened them again and smiled.

"I was trying to recapture the sensations which I experienced the first night I set out for a tiger. But it's not so easy after all these years and all the other expeditions And I wasn't alone either. Remember that, Colonel Strickland! I had a friend in the next tree. I could have spoken to him and he would have answered. That makes a world of difference. But even so——" He hoisted himself up suddenly upon his elbow, whilst a spasm of pain distorted his face. But he had remembered.

"I thought of a novice keeping her vigil in her convent chapel through the night before she took her vows. Curious, eh? The crack of a board would sound like a thunderclap. Some tiny animal, a mouse or a rat, scampering across the stones of the aisle behind her would seem the fluttering feet of the dead risen from their tombs.

The whirr of a bat would be to her, kneeling upon the flags, the hovering of demons above her head. And the night would be eternal, eh? Yes, eternal."

His voice sank to a whisper, whilst his eyes rested steadily, searchingly, upon Strickland's. Strickland returned his gaze as steadily. These two men were not trying to frighten him or deter him. Indeed, they both wished him to go, if it was safe to let him go. But each in his own way was at pains to make him understand the gravity of the ordeal through which he must pass. Strickland no longer disparaged it. But, after all, he had been challenged, and in the qualities a man most treasures.

"I should, nevertheless, like to go," he said evenly; and the modesty of his answer won the day.

Wingrove dropped back again upon his pillows.

"Good!" he cried in a brisk voice. "The two *shikaris* who go with me are out now tracking the brute. If he kills to-day or to-night, he will leave his kill until to-morrow night—that's my lord, the tiger's, way. He's like the rest of us; he likes his game hung for a bit. If the trackers locate a kill, they will return here in the morning and take you to the spot. They'll build a little platform for you—a *machan* we call it—in a tree, and then they'll leave you with your rifle, or, rather, my rifle."

He raised an arm above his head and rang a bell.

"I'll have the foresight touched up for you with luminous paint. You'll have a strong moon, but even so, you'll need the paint."

He sent for the rifle, and painted the foresight as he lay in bed, and handed the weapon back to his servant with an order.

"He will take it up now with a bag of cartridges to the Guest-House and give it to one of your boys," Wingrove explained to Strickland.

"Thank you."

Strickland and Thorne rose as one man to take their leave, but the crippled hunter would only let Thorne go.

"There's a detail or two you ought to fix in your mind," he said to Strickland; and when the two men were alone, he ordered a peg of whisky and soda for each of them, and threw up from the well of his experience a bucket or two of jungle-lore.

"The tiger," he said, "is a very important person in the kingdom of animals and does not go to his dinner either unannounced or unprotected. You will know long beforehand of his approach, and he, unless you are very still, with a cold grip upon your nerves, will know whilst he is still out of danger that you are waiting for him. In which case either (*a*) you will not see him at all, or (*b*) he may set about hunting you."

"How shall I know of his approach?" Strickland asked.

"First of all a bird will come, a big kind of nighthawk. You will see it flitting in and out of the trees in the moonlight, and you will find its flight curiously eerie."

"The bat in the convent chapel," said Strickland.

"Yes, but perhaps a little more startling. For if you are very quiet, the bird will settle on a branch and call on a harsh piercing note. Then for a while nothing more will happen. The jungle-cat will come next. But you will probably not see the cat at all—not even in a strong moonlight. He will be so silent and swift, so—one with the shadows. But you will hear him—and that's where" —Wingrove's face broadened into a grin and he repeated softly—"yes, that's where it'll be up to you, my friend. You'll hear him suddenly snarling and tearing the kill at the foot of your tree, and you'll find the impulse to loose off your rifle at that jungle-cat overwhelming. Yes, even though I have warned you! You'll feel that you must! No other sin in your whole life will ever tempt you more. I tell you that even now I have to watch myself with all my attention, lest I should let go with a rush and do that wicked thing. But if you manage to sit very quiet, after a time the snarling and the tearing will cease altogether. There will follow a silence which will last a minute or so

whilst the cat listens. Then it will utter a yelp like a dog in fear; and that will be all you'll have to do with the jungle-cat. Another interval of time will pass—oh, two or three hundred years!—and in due course, my lord himself will come."

Wingrove lay back, with the memories of a century of such nights glowing in his eyes and transfiguring his face. He beat with his clenched fists upon the sheets in a gust of passion.

"Oh, how I wish I were going with you," he cried.

"So do I," Strickland agreed whole-heartedly.

He walked back to the bungalow on the hill in a curiously expectant mood. He was hardened to solitary bivouacs in desolate spaces, but both Thorne and Wingrove were aware of that, and made light of it as a preparation for his vigil of to-morrow. He could not but be impressed by their disregard of it. It was not that they overlooked, but they deliberately set it aside as of small account. He must be ready for some contingency which was quite new to him, something different in kind from anything he had known, something altogether on the outer edge of experience.

He had the bungalow still to himself that evening, and whilst he smoked his cigar upon the veranda after his lonely dinner, that expectancy deepened and strengthened until it became a foreboding. The moon would not rise on that night until many hours had passed. Beneath him the lights of Mogok twined and strayed over the floor of that cup in the hills. Above his head a myriad of stars marched across a clear, dark sky. High up, under the very rim of the mountains, a bush fire lit up a wild tract of country. Some way off, upon his left hand, long parallel rows of ascending lamps marked the many steps to the great Pagoda. Behind him the illimitable jungle whispered its secrets.

A night in a haunted house! The vigil of a novice in

a convent chapel, filled with the little menacing voices which plot and plan in the darkness! Both those images were vividly etched in his mind. From them, and from the witchery of the tropical night, and from his own imagination—for no man content with months of loneliness is without that gift—from the combination of these circumstances, there was born suddenly in Strickland's mind a conviction that something tremendous in its consequences would happen to-morrow in that jungle whispering behind him. In nine times out of ten—no, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the premonition is shown afterwards to be a mere marsh-light and delusion.

But the hundredth time it is the truth.

CHAPTER THREE: *And the Tiger*

WHEN Strickland came out the next morning to his breakfast upon the veranda, he saw two strange natives seated on the ground; and before he had finished his meal, Captain Thorne ascended the winding path between the flower beds and joined him.

"These are Wingrove's two *shikaris*," Thorne explained. "A big sambhar was killed yesterday a few miles from the village in the jungle. There isn't much doubt that you'll get your opportunity to-night. The *shikaris* will guide you to the spot, build your *machan*, and come back for you in the morning. The place is four hours' marching from here. So you will do well to start after an early luncheon."

Strickland set off in the heat of the day, with Wingrove's trackers and two others who carried a native bedstead between them to make a platform in the branches of a tree. They marched by forest paths and during the last hour through brushwood in many places as dense as a hedge. And towards sunset they came to a small ragged glade in the very heart of the jungle. At the foot of a great tree on the edge of the open space a dead stag lay, his mouth open and black, and the flies crawling in and out of it.

The trackers built the charpoy into the branches twelve feet above the ground and then shouldered Strickland up into the great tree. But all with the greatest silence and precaution; and if a word had to be said, it was said in a whisper.

"For the tiger will be near his kill," murmured one of the men. "Sir, we will return for you at daylight, and may you have good fortune."

They stole away with an amazing noiselessness. Not a twig snapped. The faint swish and rustle of bushes might have been the stir made by a passing wind. Then that ceased and only the swoop and chatter of birds above the trees were audible. Then those voices too died away. Strickland had brought with him a case of sandwiches and a flask. He laid Wingrove's rifle, already loaded, on the charpoy at his side and whilst he ate his meal, took a careful survey of the tiny arena. He had a clear view of the sambhar beneath him, and between the leaves he commanded every corner of the glade. It was a rough oval with a floor of coarse grass, and a solid green wall ringing it about—except just at one spot. At the end upon his right-hand side there was a small break in the undergrowth where bushes had been crushed to the ground. It was black like the opening of a cavern.

"That's the path he made," Strickland said to himself. "That's the path I must watch."

But the light was already failing. Even whilst he watched, the black cavern mouth was no blacker than the undergrowth about it. The glade became a place of gloom and shadows. Its walls receded.

Strickland altered the position of his rifle so that its muzzle pointed directly to the fast disappearing gap; and as he did so, he noticed a silvery stump of tree just by the side of it. Hardly noticeable before, it glimmered more and more importantly as the darkness fell.

"I shall know where to look now," he assured himself with a considerable relief. For the swiftly changing twilight transfigured everything. The little round of grass was widening into a prairie; metres were extending into miles. And suddenly it was quite dark.

Jungle and open space alike vanished. He might have been lifted above an infinite plain, for all the knowledge with which his eyes could furnish him. As yet there were no stars, and as yet his eyes were not accustomed to the darkness. But in a little while he became like a man once

blind who recovers some shadow of his vision. He felt along the barrel of his rifle, and ever so far away he saw a speck of white, the mark of the path by which the royal brute with the velvet paws must come. He had now nothing to do but to wait.

Nothing but that! Whilst he waited, he recalled those other nights which had been quoted to him roughly as parallels, the watcher in a haunted house, the novice in her convent chapel. Curious phrases Wingrove had used —the eternity of the night, its eeriness. Eerie is was, and Strickland caught at the reason of its eeriness. The loss of vision had sharpened his hearing so that in that tremendous hush the tiniest noise resounded like a trumpet, and sounds could be heard where there were no sounds at all.

Certain changes took place in the aspect of the night, even to his unaccustomed eyes. The stars came out over his head, were caught in the high branches of the tree, trembled and shook in their captivity, freed themselves and wheeled on. In a very short while now the moon would be rising, he reflected cheerfully; and he took from his pocket his watch with the luminous hands. It had stopped, of course, for the hands only pointed to nine. But when he raised it to rewind it, he heard it ticking. He remembered that he had set it before he left the bungalow, and had wound it before he climbed into the tree. It was only nine o'clock then? It was incredible! There were three hours still to run before moon-rise.

It was some time after this that a small bird settled upon a spray; and the sound it made was a clatter which split the night and set his heart pounding at his side; and later, after hundreds and hundreds of years, some leaves broke from a bough and in a shower rustled and pattered down to the ground. Back there in the bungalow he had thought of the feet of the dead. Here it seemed to him that some old watchman from another century had come to life and sprung his rattle in the deep of the forest.

"This won't do," said Strickland. "No, it won't;" and he spoke in a curious agitated whisper, of which he caught the note—a note of flightiness which alarmed him—almost a note of panic.

To re-establish himself, he strained his eyes towards the white stump. So long as he could see that he was satisfied. But even the stump failed him. It was visible, certainly, in the place where it was rooted, but as he watched it, suddenly, without giving him a hint of warning, it dashed across the ground like a white animal. Strickland closed his eyes, pressing the lids together tightly, and then opened them in a hurry lest something should happen to him whilst they were closed. Both Thorne and Wingrove had calculated aright. The tension and loneliness of that vigil had indeed brought him to the very edge of reason.

But soon he became aware of a change. The vault of the sky had lost its ebony, the stars had grown wan. Somewhere, beyond the prison house of the jungle, the moon had risen. A light, vaporous, unearthly, tender and beautiful as the sheen of pearls, was welling out in a silent tide from under the rim of the sky. It invaded the pool of darkness in which Strickland was plunged. The trees and the glade resumed their contours, and suddenly the leaves upon the topmost sprays sparkled like jewels. Over them she came sailing in her golden panoply, the Huntress, and no lover ever welcomed her more fervently than the watcher in the tree. For in her train came sanity.

Strickland worked his shoulders to loosen his sinews.

"At any moment now," he said to himself. He sat forward with his eyes upon the white mark. But oddly enough, although the storm of his nerves had quieted, his forebodings of yester-evening crowded back upon him so vividly that, willy-nilly, he must take them for prophecies. The hush of the night, the lonely glade, the very quiet of the trees, all seemed ominous and fateful. Strickland

waited in a transcendent expectation. Something tremendous would be born out of that night.

Then all forebodings vanished from his mind. In a moment, brain, eyes, and muscle were subdued to one purpose, the purpose for which he had come. For in the enclosure of the trees a bird was flying. Strickland heard first of all the flutter of its wings as it circled about the enclosure. Then he caught a glimpse of it. It was a big bird, a hawk, and as it flitted in the misty light, now and then the underside of its wings flashed like silver. It settled upon a bough and called with a startling loudness in a peculiarly harsh and piercing note. A warning or an invitation? The call ceased. Strickland clenched his hand round the neck of the stock of his rifle.

"I—must—not—shoot."

He repeated Wingrove's admonition, emphasising each word slowly like a child learning a lesson. It was well that he did. For at the foot of his tree there arose such a clamour of snarling and rending that his heart jumped within his breast and his rifle was up to his shoulder. Though he knew that if he did shoot, his night was wasted, the temptation to shoot was almost a necessity. But he mastered himself. His rifle was lowered on to his knees. But he felt that he had lost years out of the years which remained to him.

A little rail had been built in front of his platform, on which he could rest the barrel of his rifle. His foresight was covered with luminous paint. He would allow the tiger to come well out into the open. He judged the distance which he would give him. There was a darker patch of grass, about halfway between the white stump and his tree.

"There!" he said to himself, "when he reaches that dark patch. Then!"

And in the far distance he heard a movement in the undergrowth, a snapping of twigs, a sound of bushes whipping back.

The jungle-cat heard the sounds, too. For it ceased from its meal and its snarling was silenced. Then it uttered one sharp squeal and flashed across the glade. Its master was near. By the mouth of that cavern something moved. There was suddenly a great rending of the jungle, and out into the moonlight leapt a man.

He was dressed in the shoes, the stockings rolled below the bare knees, and the shorts usually worn by the English in these parts. His shirt torn at the shoulders revealed a powerful throat; his sleeves were turned back above the elbow and he carried in his hand a great bludgeon which he handled as though it was a dandy's cane. Strickland's first impression of him, after his shock of surprise, was of enormous power, the power of an animal. For he moved ever so lightly on his feet. He was tall, above the ordinary, with broad shoulders and a deep chest, but he was lean beyond description, lean of flank and leg and belly—as though for many years he had starved—lean enough to arouse pity.

Strickland, indeed, out of pity, would have called to him from his hiding-place. But the man turned his face, and Strickland remained silent. For the face he saw was not merely haggard and lined, but to Strickland's strained fancies, horribly evil, evil to the point of majesty. Strickland had never given much credit to those who discerned auras of red and blue about the heads of people. Yet evil seemed to flow from this man, so savage, so furtive he looked, such a mixture of cunning and cruelty was stamped upon his features. Yet he had had real beauty once. The broad forehead, the straight nose with the thin nostrils, the oval of the chin showed it still. He stood out in the open, his eyeballs glistening in the moonlight, the sweat shining on his face; and he moved his head slowly from side to side like a great cobra before he strikes. There was something bestial, something subtle. Strickland actually shuddered in his retreat. Thus, he

thought, must Lucifer have looked on the morrow of his fall.

The man gazed up to the skies, seeking his direction. Then he was gone. Strickland would have believed that he had been the victim of an hallucination, had he not heard the man breaking his way through the jungle in the direction of the road. . . .

No other tiger passed that way that night.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Mystery*

STRICKLAND related his experience to Captain Thorne as he sat at his breakfast after his return to the bungalow. He was well aware that Thorne listened with a stoical incredulity, but he went on with it to the end.

"Yes, yes," said Thorne soothingly. He might have been speaking to a patient whom the doctor had bidden him to humour. Strickland was not annoyed.

"You think that I grew fanciful and saw visions," he said with a smile. "Sitting there in the sunlight, I could almost believe it myself. But then I should believe that I had slept in this bungalow all night, that I never went out into the jungle at all."

"You certainly did that," Thorne assured him, with a look of curiosity upon his face. For the tone of doubt in which Strickland had spoken did suggest that he was not altogether sure.

"Well, then I saw the man, too," said Strickland doggedly, and he strove once more to paint in words the vivid picture in his memory. "He was ferocious with the ferocity of men who have been hungry for years."

Thorne repeated his "Yes, yes," and rose quietly to his feet. He was still apparently in a sick room, and must needs tread softly lest the invalid should be exasperated. Strickland, however, only laughed, but he said with every intention of carrying out the threat:

"If you say 'yes, yes,' to me again, Thorne, I'll throw a plate at your head."

Thorne edged a little nearer to the veranda steps.

"I should deserve that for quite another reason," he replied, "I have heard this morning that one of the Forest

Officers will be here in a couple of days, so that, after all, I need not have troubled you as I have done."

Certainly Captain Thorne was not remarkable for tact. For having clearly shown that he disbelieved Strickland's story, he now emphasised the point that the Colonel had not succeeded in doing the job which he had undertaken. Strickland, however, was at this moment impervious to such pricks. He was utterly engrossed in an endeavour to convince this singularly thick-headed Policeman that he was speaking the truth.

"The man gave me the impression that he had been twisted and disfigured out of his setting," he persisted. "Like some fine portrait which has been blackened and mutilated by fire. Yes, that was it! That was what struck me so vividly. Years of sordid horror, after years of established comfort. He had fallen out of Heaven, like the Archangel, into tortures incredible and had escaped seething with wrath."

Thorne was on the point of saying "Yes, yes," as he turned back, but he saw Strickland's hand reaching out towards a plate and he hurriedly revised his formula.

"Quite so," he said. "Now I'll tell you, sir, what we might do. You want to buy a ruby, don't you?"

Colonel Strickland made a sudden movement, he drew in his breath with a little gasp as though something of extreme importance had for the moment slipped from his memory.

"Indeed, I do," he said fervently.

"Very well. I'll walk with you to the offices of the mines and on the way we'll stop and ask a question of Maung H'la."

"Who in the world's Maung H'la?" asked Strickland.

"The greatest scoundrel unhanged," Thorne replied calmly. "But he's also a native of that village which the tiger has been besieging, and keeps in touch with his people. So if any remarkable stranger has been seen in that neighbourhood, he will be likely to know."

"Let us go," said Strickland, and he shouted to his servant for his stick and his topee.

Thorne stopped before a house facing an open space of abandoned excavations. In the garden a stout, perspiring man was spraying his rose bushes. At the sight of him Thorne whistled in surprise. For this stout, perspiring man was the most indefatigable and amongst the most important of the servants of the company. And here he was at eleven o'clock of the morning tending his flowers.

"Where's your gardner, Mr. Dodge?" Thorne called out.

"Maung H'la?" said Mr. Dodge. He wiped his streaming forehead, replaced his topee and learned over the gate. "Damn the fellow, he has bolted."

Captain Thorne's shoulders stiffened. He introduced Strickland, gave Mr. Dodge a brief epitome of his history and explained the object of his visit to Mogok; but this little speech was, in spite of its exactitude, absent in manner. Captain Thorne's speculations were chasing the man who had bolted.

"When did he go?" he asked.

Mr. Dodge lit a cigar.

"Two days ago, in the afternoon."

"Why?"

"Sheer terror."

"Who frightened him?"

"I haven't one idea," Mr. Dodge grumbled. "I wish I had, for Maung H'la was a first-class gardener. I wasn't on the spot at the time. But the servants told me about it."

"Yes?" Thorne asked. "What did they tell you?"

"Why, it sounded like a fairy story, or rather it would anywhere else," said Mr. Dodge with a smile at Strickland. "But in the East the fairy stories are the only things which are really true. About four o'clock two days ago Maung H'la was working here, or more probably leaning over this gate smoking one of my cheroots, when a big,

lean fellow came swinging down the road from the bazaar. At the sight of him Maung H'la scuttered round to the back of the house like a rabbit. They had got to hide him somewhere quick, for some one worse than all the devils rolled into one was after him. Maung H'la was shaking and jabbering like a man with the ague. They hid him away, all right, but they had hardly finished before the door at the back was quietly pushed open and there was the stranger asking for Maung H'la."

"Did your people describe him to you?" Thorne interrupted.

"Did they not!" replied Mr. Dodge. "I got the impression of a Greek god gone wrong," and Captain Thorne glanced swiftly towards Strickland.

"Of course he got no information from the servants," Mr. Dodge continued. "No one had ever heard of Maung H'la. It didn't seem possible that a Maung H'la could exist and they not hear of him. On the whole the gentleman might take it for granted that there was no Maung H'la—and the gentleman departed with a most unpleasant grin upon his face. They gave him ten minutes and then unlocked the outhouse in which they had stored away Maung H'la. But Maung H'la had climbed out of the window, curse the fellow, and no one has ever seen him since."

Mr. Dodge turned to Strickland.

"You are going along to the office now, are you?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I'll follow you in ten minutes and we'll see what we can do for you."

Mr. Dodge retired into his house. Captain Thorne stared at Strickland in a perplexity.

"It's quite true what Dodge said," he reflected aloud. "The fairy stories are real here. Things fantastic to you and me are just the order of the day. Yes, yes."

He was silent, with his forehead creased and his mouth

pursed up. Then he attacked his problem from a new angle.

"A Greek god gone wrong," he repeated. "Practically your description, Colonel Strickland."

"Better than mine," Strickland answered. "Fewer words."

"No doubt," Thorne agreed, following out his own thoughts. "It's evident, then, that you did see the man you talked about in the forest. Do you know that I hardly believed you?"

"You quite did not believe me," returned Strickland.

"It's evident, too, that he made for that village in the jungle after Maung H'la."

Captain Thorne remained sunk in gloom.

"I don't like it," he said, and with an abrupt movement he started off along a winding road between the excavations. "This is our road."

Strickland fell in beside him and for a little part of the way they walked in silence; Thorne every now and then glancing at his companion and opening his mouth to make a statement and then catching the words back again before they were uttered. His responsibilities were pressing upon him, transforming him into a pedant of formalities and precautions. They had covered half the distance to the medley of buildings which formed the offices of the company before he could bring himself to the point of speech. And even then his speech was nothing but a disappointment to Strickland, so hedged it was with reservations and secrecies.

"Maung H'la as a boy was employed in the mines sifting the gravel through a sieve. He learnt some English, travelled to Rangoon, and became a bearer—ran about with tourists, you know. This went on for some years. But in the end he was taken on as a permanent servant by one—well—family, shall we say? He travelled with them to many parts of the world. Finally, he went with them to England."

At this point Captain Thorne was in so much difficulty to make his narrative colourless that he had to stop. Strickland, however, was still in the grip of the premonition which yesterday had beset him. In the open space here between the town and the company's offices, with the white road under his feet and the high, steep, jungle-covered slopes all about him, a glowing green under the cloudless blue of the sky, the premonition was weaker. It stood further aloof. But it waited only for the shadows. At the fall of night it would be back with him, a living conviction that he had seen the beginning of some tremendous battle in which his every energy would be engaged. He looked for clues in vain so far.

"You said Maung H'la was the greatest scoundrel unhanged," he reminded Thorne.

"Did I? I had no right to say it. For what I know, I know in the strictest confidence. Publicly, there is nothing against Maung H'la. If he was elected to a position of responsibility, no one would have the right to protest. But—no doubt something happened in England—yes, yes—something occurred. And it was thought better that Maung H'la should return to his own country." Thorne turned in a sudden alarm lest he should have said more than his duty allowed. "There was no deportation, you understand. No, no, not an idea of it. Just a notion of certain authorities that he would be more valuable to the community in his own country than in England. And he returned quite willingly."

"Glad to get out of England scot-free." Thus Colonel Strickland bluntly interpreted all this prolixity.

"I couldn't say that for a moment," Thorne rejoined earnestly.

"When did he return?" Colonel Strickland asked.

Captain Thorne reflected.

"Yes, I can answer that. Nearly two years ago."

Strickland had another question to ask and was at pains to approach it warily.

"Two years is a long time. Certainly it wouldn't be right to hold a suspicion against a man for two years. But, I suppose, a little trouble is taken to make sure that he doesn't get taken on by tourists as a servant again."

Thorne swung round with a look of surprise upon his face. For the first time he seemed to recognise signs of intelligence in his companion.

"Well, I never expected you to ask me that question," he declared, and in his surprise he answered it without a single circumlocution. "Maung H'la is not any longer on the books of any of the agencies."

The two men were close now to the offices of the ruby mines. Behind them, Mr. Dodge was hurrying along to catch them up. Captain Thorne looked backwards and forwards with relief. There was no longer any time for questions to tempt him into improper revelations; and in this little reaction he himself was spurred to put a question. He found himself putting it with an energy which surprised him.

"That man in the forest—your tiger-man—are you sure that you had never seen him before? I would like you to think very carefully. Are you quite sure?"

Strickland searched amongst his memories, reviewed groups of people, at country houses, in dining-rooms, at race-meetings and theatres, at clubs and restaurants.

"I am quite sure that I never saw him before," he said; and he had not a doubt but that he spoke the truth.

Thorne nodded his head. He had expected no other answer.

"Of course it was absurd," he said, and he referred to a curious and rather alarming idea which had suddenly sprung up in his mind.

CHAPTER FIVE: *Lady Ariadne's Ruby*

THERE is nothing more universal, as there are few things more intelligible, than a love of precious stones. So much of beauty and so much of treasure lie packed in so small and shining a receptacle. Thus even the correct and punctilious Thorne lingered from his duties whilst sapphires and rubies and spinels were spread out before Strickland on a table in the great veranda.

Strickland, however, was in a most fastidious mood. He did not want a stone as long as a torpedo, nor, on the other hand, as round as a plate. Crosses of Destiny he pushed aside. He wanted a stone clear as glass and deep —well, as deep as a certain pair of eyes which for some two years now he had been sedulously recollecting. A sapphire would do very well, but it must be unquestionably blue as a tropical sea under a summer sky. Or a ruby. He was not, he said, particular. But the ruby, if ruby it was to be, must burn with the deep glow of a sunset and the sparkle of a dawn.

"Even a lady spending a pleasant morning in Bond Street without meaning to buy anything at all, couldn't be more particular than you, sir," said Thorne, with a small ray of humour. Remembering his duties, he edged towards the gate in the waist-high railing which enclosed the veranda. Mr. Dodge ran his fingers through his thin locks and said dubiously:

"Of course there's a ruby. . . . A dealer from Bombay is considering it, because he hopes that he can sell it to the Rajah of Chitapur. But no sale has been concluded. We are free to sell. . . . Only it's costly."

"I should like to see it," Strickland replied. "You see, I naturally want rather a good stone because——" He

hesitated. Of the authority which a day ago had so astonished Captain Thorne there was not now a trace. Colonel Strickland was as shy as a schoolgirl, and he knew—and the knowledge made him shyer still—that the blood was burning in his cheeks and on his forehead. But it would be good policy to name the prospective owner of the jewel. He would surely carry with him a finer stone if he used the magic of her name than if he relied upon that of an obscure retired Lieutenant-Colonel of the Guards. So out the name came—"Because it's meant for Lady Ariadne Ferne."

He dropped the name delicately in front of that group of officials as though it were the most precious of their jewels; and at once every one of them stood to attention. Strickland had certainly been right. Smiles ran from face to face. There was a stir of admiration. Even Thorne again deferred those overwhelming duties of his and drifted back to the group about the table.

"Is Lady Ariadne Ferne a friend of yours?" he asked with a peculiar intentness which Strickland was quick to notice and no less quick to resent.

"She is," he replied; "and what of it?"

"Nothing, except that I envy you."

Strickland was reminded suddenly of an old major whose constant advice to the junior officers in their relationship to their men was to keep something up their sleeves. Captain Thorne must have drunk deep of that old major's wisdom. For he kept things up his sleeve all day. Here, for instance, he was once more concealing some knowledge which he possessed. For a moment the sunshine died off that open veranda. Strickland felt the chill of an icy wind. Was it in that quarter that the expected battle was to be fought? Then, indeed, every ounce of his energy would be engaged. Yet between those three persons, the man of the jungle, Maung H'la and Lady Ariadne Ferne, set so far apart in space and circumstance, what link could there be?

Strickland stared blindly out across the plain, the purpose of his visit quite forgotten. For the hint that there was a link marched exactly with the forebodings which had crept into his mind during his first evening at the bungalow.

A voice at his elbow brought him with a start out of the mist of his conjectures. Mr. Dodge had taken his keys and unlocked a safe in an inner room. He now stood again beside the table with a small pouch of black velvet in his hand.

"You will see, Colonel Strickland, that the stone is of the true pigeon-blood red and without a flaw."

The other stones were cleared away. Mr. Dodge had the manner of some old butler who serves a claret of a rare and ancient vintage decanted without a speck of must. He drew the precious ruby, wrapped in a fold of tissue paper, from the pouch and laid it all alone on the black velvet pad, where it lay glowing like a thing alive—almost, one might say, throbbing.

From whatever angle Strickland looked at it, deep in the heart of it burned a spark of fire. It had the size of a large filbert nut and its shape, too, and it was of a purity and a depth such as Strickland had never seen before.

Mr. Dodge gazed at it in ecstasy. Strickland might have done the same but he did not wish to increase the price. Clerks and officials stood in expectation of his verdict. He gave it, but in language quite inadequate to the occasion.

"Yes, that's about it," he said. He took it up in the palm of his hand and turned it over with his thumb.

"What can I buy this for?"

A price was named. Strickland reflected that he had been saving money every day during his two years' wandering.

"Very well, Mr. Dodge. I'll give you a cheque for it now."

He was guided into the office and seated in the direc-

tor's chair. A slip of paper worth four thousand pounds passed into the keeping of Mr. Dodge, the velvet pouch with its ruby into the hands of Colonel Strickland.

"I think," said Mr. Dodge gallantly, "that it will add a grace even to Lady Ariadne Ferne."

Lady Ariadne Ferne would have been called by another age the reigning toast. Wherever the picture papers of England reached there her fame was spread. Her loveliness was as familiar as a copy of the Bible. Dull Members of Parliament excused their insignificance to their constituents by pleading that there was not room in the Press for Lady Ariadne and themselves. Not a picture gallery was complete without her portrait. No photographer could sleep at nights until he had secured from her a sitting. No advertisement of ladies' requisites from a face cream to silk stockings had the slightest value unless it carried the approbation of her signature. She was twenty-three years old in this year and already legends clustered about her name, like the curls of her bobbed hair about her face. Stories of the crowds which her beauty collected; of her waywardness and audacity and good-nature; of the swift uptake of her mind; of the charity of her talk; of how she made with her own supple fingers the shining frocks which turned Requin's hair grey and sent Paville to a rest-cure—true and false and half true and half false they went the round of the world. Even the Esquimaux maidens in their igloos had heard of her and hoped that they had some touch of her in their appearance.

Calumny, of course, had dug its claws into her good fame—such a fine occasion and so defenceless a victim were not to be missed. The cheaper satirists made their pittance out of her. But her outshining kindliness, her humour, the prettiest gift of mimicry in the world, and hed loyalty—the loyalty of a soldier—surrounded her with a hedge of friends, conventional and unconventional, against which the arrows of calumny were powerless.

Even here at Mogok on the Irrawaddy, John Strickland became at once a select and admirable personage, not because he bought one of the kings among rubies, but because he bought it for her.

He shook hands with Mr. Dodge and his associates.

"May we mention the ruby's destination?" Mr. Dodge asked.

"Yes," Strickland replied pleasantly. "For you will in any case whether I consent or no. And I can't blame you."

He walked away briskly from the veranda, and to his surprise found Thorne at his elbow.

"What, still here?" he asked. He was on the top of his spirits at this moment. "Do you know, Captain Thorne, you have given me the impression during the last two days that the whole of Upper Burma would at once relapse into barbarism, if you took your eyes off it for an instant! And I find you sauntering through a morning like a gentleman of leisure."

Captain Thorne made a surprising answer.

"Perhaps, sir, you will thank me for my idleness."

Strickland was silenced at once. Thorne meant at last to unlock his tight-closed lips. But he would do it at his own time and in his own cautious way. There would be a slow output of level and uninteresting phrases, beneath which Strickland must discover for himself what he could. He did not seek to persuade but walked back across the area of old diggings without a question.

At a corner of the road Thorne stopped.

"Do you see that bungalow?" he asked, pointing up a narrow lane.

"Yes."

"That's mine. Let's go in and have a cocktail," he said, much in the tone which Mr. Wemmick once used when he saw a particular church. "Hallo! There's a church! Let's go in!"

"Certainly," answered Strickland. "I should like a cocktail."

He was led into a sitting-room with a light wall-paper against which hung photographs of groups—nothing but groups of men who had done something and were celebrating it by being photographed, or who were going to do something and on that account had to be photographed all together, too. There was a group of an Oxford eight, of a football team, of a polo team, of the officers of a battalion, of a shooting party in the porch of a country house, of a cricket eleven. An oar was hung high up near the ceiling. Cups stood upon various bureaux and cabinets. One side of the room was occupied by a bookcase filled with an astounding variety of books. Mr. Pepys kept company with the last thing in American detective novels. Daniel Defoe rubbed shoulders with Captain Marryat.

"I'll leave you for a moment whilst I mix the cocktails," said Thorne. He placed a box of cigarettes, an ash-tray and a match-stand on a small table at the end of the chintz-covered Chesterfield sofa. Strickland seated himself obediently and lit a cigarette. In the doorway Thorne turned back.

"By the way, you might care to look at some of these papers."

He was very careless and indifferent both in his words and his movements, so indifferent indeed that the indifference was intentional. He gathered together some papers, the weekly editions of *The Times, Punch, Life* and on the top of them all he placed the latest copy of *The Gossip,* a paper famous for its printing, its admirable letterpress and its photographs. These he laid beside Strickland.

"They are probably more recent than any you have seen," he said, and he went out of the room.

Strickland took up the *Gossip,* as he was meant to do. He turned over leaf after leaf until he was halfway

through. Then he sat very still with the paper open upon his knees at a page of photographs, until once more Thorne reappeared within the room.

Thorne carried a tray on which stood a couple of glasses filled with a brownish drink.

"It's a Bacardi with a dash of grenadine," he said, and as he held out the tray, his eyes dropped to the open page. "You haven't taken much time to discover that!" he added.

"Not even as much time as you allowed me for its discovery," Strickland returned quietly as he took his glass.

"That" was a photograph of the Club enclosure during a race meeting at Gatwick. It was a day of storm, but the rain had stopped when the picture was taken. On the lawn in the foreground, two slim-legged girls wearing raincoats buttoned up to their chins were represented. Each of them held a pencil and a race-card, and both looked extremely serious and woebegone. Underneath the photograph was printed: "Lady Ariadne Ferne (right) and Corinne, the famous dancer (left), at Gatwick races."

"Well," Thorne admitted. "Yes—that is what I invited you here to see. What do you think of it?"

"It's an excellent portrait of Lady Ariadne," Strickland replied.

"And besides?"

"Besides? I think that those two poor girls have not had that information straight from the manger, without which racing becomes almost a gamble."

"And besides?" Captain Thorne insisted.

John Strickland laid the paper on the sofa at his side.

"Besides? Yes," he said deliberately, "I read in that picture that the world of England has grown a little more generous in its sympathies, and a little wider in its outlook and a great deal wiser in its recognition of people who make their own way than it was in—shall we say 1914? But that's not all. I don't need to recognise, for I have always known, that Lady Ariadne has many

friends in many different walks of life; and amongst those friends I beg you, Captain Thorne, to remember that I count myself one. But however strange and—let us be frank!—inappropriate those friends may seem to you quartered in this little self-centred nook, they all have an invaluable thing in common—the staunchness of Lady Ariadne's friendship."

The rebuke would have sounded like pedantry but for the simple sincerity of tone with which it was delivered. But Captain Thorne stood his ground. He, too, was in earnest.

"I wish definitely not to offend you, Colonel Strickland," he began. "If such an intention had been in my mind, I should certainly not have invited you into my house for the purpose of gratifying it. But I have seen you pay a great price for a very valuable jewel. I must therefore think that the welfare of the lady to whom you mean to offer it is of great value to you."

Between both these men the screen of pretence was now down.

"It is," Strickland agreed.

Thorne's nod of the head implied thanks for Strickland's openness, as much as agreement with his words.

"Very well, then! I break through the reservations which my duty puts upon me. I tell you frankly that if Maung H'la had stood in the dock in England, as I think he should have done, Corinne, the famous dancer, would have stood beside him."

At once Strickland was on his feet, his face pale in despite of his sunburn, his hands clenched. For a moment or two he looked steadily at Thorne. There was no anger in his eyes, only an overwhelming fear. The tiger-man of the jungle, Maung H'la, Corinne the dancer, Ariadne Ferne! It was her, then, that the tremendous event was to menace. No wonder, he thought, that every nerve of him, from his first night at Mogok, had cried "Danger!"

"Can you tell me no more?" he asked.

"I have already told you more than I should," replied Thorne.

Yet after all he did bring himself to add to what he had said. Strickland had already hired a motor-car to take him back to Thabeikyin in time to go that night on board the steamer running south to Mandalay. After lunching at the bungalow, he packed his servants and his luggage into the tonneau of the car and took his seat beside the driver. But Mogok was still in sight when Thorne stepped out on to the road, and held up his hand. As the car stopped Thorne went up to Strickland's side. He was confused and guilty.

"I should like things to go well with you, sir," he said, fingering the stubble of his moustache to cover his embarrassment. "So when you get back to England, you might look up the inquest upon Mrs. Elizabeth Clutter."

He stood back quickly and waved to the chauffeur to proceed. As the car started again, Strickland reached out a hand the more warmly to thank his informant. But Thorne merely saluted, standing at attention the while, the junior before his superior officer. The ease and friendliness of Strickland had made an overpowering appeal to this shy and formal man. But his conscience was already upbraiding him for allowing his sympathy to out-range his discretion. No more of it, however! It was safer to salute than to risk a handshake.

The motor-car climbed the great pass and turned and twisted along the jungle road with the apes playing in the dust in front of it. But Strickland had no eyes for the wondrous scene. He pictured himself as a sailor at a capstan lifting slowly link after link of a heavy chain out of the dark water and wondering what dread mystery was rising nearer and nearer to the light of day.

CHAPTER SIX: *Ariadne Herself*

STRICKLAND travelled from Plymouth to London on an evening towards the end of March; and the next morning, without waiting to answer even one of the letters piled upon his table, he put the ruby into his pocket and walked quickly to his club. The gipsy finds a good share of his pleasure in the first aspect of the town to which he returns, and if the town is London his pleasure is enormously increased. The women and girls with their bright frocks and lovely faces, their slender elegance, their curiously attractive air of impertinence, as though each one knew that she was the unquestioned proprietor of the town and all its suburbs, their rose-coloured legs, the whole shining, cultivated look of them, make on this first day each one of them a miracle to him. There are friends to be met haphazard on the footways, astonishing news to be gathered about other friends, gossip to be exchanged, entertainments to be planned. But on this morning, though the sun was bright, the air brisk, and Bond Street a parade, Strickland hardly stopped to exchange a word with any one. And more than once he crossed the road when he saw a loquacious friend approaching. His business at his club would brook no delay.

He found with relief the morning-room quite empty, and gathering together the latest of the social papers, he sat himself down seriously to study them. Experience had long since taught him that even after a short absence abroad there was no more necessary preliminary to a call upon Lady Ariadne Ferne. For she was almost certain, in the meanwhile, to have done something startling, if not outrageous, which he would be expected to know and

to accept as the perfectly normal and correct thing for her to do. Never had he reason so to congratulate himself upon his prudence as he had this morning. For he found very quickly two items. The first of them nearly took his breath away, and he was prepared for that. The second robbed that fine March day of all its sunlight.

The first appeared on a page devoted to theatrical gossip—as thus:

> "I am able exclusively to make an announcement of unusual interest. 'Sonia, the Witch,' the light opera by Walter Rosen which has been running for two years at the 'Volkstheatre' in Vienna, is to be produced at the Rubicon Theatre. The event, however, will not take place until later on in July or early in August. The part of Sonia will be taken by Lady Ariadne Ferne."

Strickland turned quickly to the other papers. By some amazing chance, every contributor of theatrical gossip had exclusively the same lollipop to offer to its public. There was a unanimity about them which could not be set aside. The statement, besides, had a certain amount of reason on its side. The Earldom of Browden had year by year declined in prosperity since its great days towards the end of the eighteenth century. The war of 1914 had very nearly given it its finishing blow. The present Earl, whose daughter Ariadne was, taxed up to the ears and then rated over the top of his head, was crippled besides by a couple of huge country palaces which no one would buy, a vast estate of agricultural land, and long-established traditions of generosity which it was almost impossible to him to forego. Strickland accepted the statement as true.

"She is certainly living up to her form," he said to himself with a chuckle; and then his amusement died altogether away.

Another paragraph had caught his eye. For a moment he was stunned. Then he raced through the other papers,

folded them neatly and laid them aside. Almost every one of them had the same story to tell, hinted at here, joked about there, openly stated somewhere else.

> "The rumour so widely spread that an interesting engagement would shortly be announced, is now confirmed. Certain family objections which at one time threatened to be serious, have now been withdrawn. The two parties are Lady Ariadne Ferne and the rising young barrister and politician, Mr. Julian Ransome. Mr. Ransome's speeches upon the future relations of the Dominions and the Mother-country have secured for him the ear of the House of Commons and the interest of his political leaders."

In the crash of Strickland's hopes even the forebodings which had so occupied his thoughts at Mogok, and had hurried him across India to catch a steamer at Bombay, that he might reach England the sooner, were quite forgotten. He sat for an hour in that silent and empty room, upbraiding himself for his folly in ever going away. At times he strove to disbelieve the truth of all these hints and statements. If Ariadne was intending to marry Julian Ransome, would she also be arranging to play the leading part in a musical comedy from Vienna? Your answer, of course, would be "No," unless you knew Ariadne Ferne. In that case—well, in that case, the only thing to do was to go yourself and ask her. She would reply without any evasions or pretences. And it was better to know—even if the knowledge sent you wandering again into the lone corners of the earth. Strickland took his hat down from the peg and walked out across St. James's Square to the big Browden house at a corner of Park Lane.

He was led at once, as if he had been expected, up a succession of interminable staircases, and at the very top of the house was ushered into a high, long room. Strickland never entered that room but he was surprised by it.

One expected bewildering colours, a medley of ornaments and furniture, a dominant note of jazz. Instead one found oneself in a room in which Jane Austen might have written her books, so polished was the floor, so sparse the furniture, so chaste the decorations. One or two modern comforts broke the severity—a huge divan with a mass of cushions, a deep arm-chair, a grand piano, and some fine engravings of Morland upon the white distempered walls. Ariadne, her fair head bandaged with a handkerchief of gipsy hues, was ruefully watching some pungent decoction boil in a silver kettle over a spirit lamp. She sprang up as Strickland entered the room and greeted him with both her hands.

"Oh, my dear," she cried all in a breath, "I saw in the papers that you had landed at Plymouth yesterday, and I knew that you would come and see me this morning, and oh! I have done the most terrible thing!"

In spite of his distress, Strickland could not but laugh.

"I am quite sure you have," he answered.

It was one of her pleasant ways to greet her friends as though they had parted from her late on the night before, however long the interval had actually been. Friendship was resumed without awkwardness because it had never been broken. There was no recovery of lost ground, for no ground had been lost. She was at home with her visitor on the instant.

"Yes," she explained. "I wondered how I'd look with my hair a Venetian red, whether I would really look like a girl out of a picture by Tiepolo. So I thought I'd try just a tiny bit, you know, which wouldn't really matter much if things went wrong. But the dye wasn't Venetian red to begin with and I did much more than I meant to, besides, I got a prescription to take the dye out again"—she nodded towards her boiling kettle—"but it doesn't work at all. Isn't it too awful for words?"

She snatched the handkerchief from her head and

gazed at herself sadly in the mirror over her mantel-shelf. Strickland saw a small bobbed head of very fair, curly and shining hair which was parted upon the left side; and from the parting across to the right ran a broad, glowing strand of vivid scarlet. With her slim, straight and supple figure she had almost the look of a greatly-wronged and very indignant boy. Only no boy ever had her delicate colouring, or the whiteness of her skin, or the smooth oval of her face and the soft curve of her lips or those big curiously light-blue eyes, which could darken to sapphire in distress, and break up into sparkles of gold when humour touched her spirit.

"Yes, it's terrible, Ariadne," Strickland gravely agreed.

"I shall just have to cover it up as best I can and let it grow out," she said.

"It's the only way," said he.

"Meanwhile I shall look like a macaw."

"That can't be helped," said Strickland.

Ariadne broke into a laugh. Her face, like her parlour, was likely to surprise the stranger who had only read of her doings.

For it was quiet rather than vivacious; it had so much more of the Madonna than the sprite. It was not indeed until she laughed that the sprite took possession of her, but even then its prisoner preserved an air of dignity.

"Strickland," she cried suddenly with a change of voice. She took his arm and drew him over to the divan. "Sit there! Now take a cigarette out of that box beside you and give me one. Now take a match and light them both." She flung herself down on the left of him and asked her question.

"Do you know my Ransome?"

"The world isn't big enough to hold it."

"Don't be foolish or misunderstand me."

"It's true then?"

"Yes."

There was a moment's silence—hardly noticeable at all.

Strickland was contented with himself so far. His voice had not been falsely flippant nor had it carried any poignant accent of regret. So long as he avoided looking Ariadne straight in the face he had a very good chance of keeping his secret to himself.

"I congratulate you," he said. He laid his left hand upon hers, which were clasped upon her knees, whilst he turned to his right to knock the ash of his cigarette into the ash-tray.

"Put it here between us, for I shall want it too," Ariadne commanded.

The ash-tray was duly placed on the divan between them.

"Did you have trouble over your engagement?" he asked.

Ariadne nodded.

"A little. Of course I'm a disappointment." She leaned forward with her chin propped upon her hands and gloomily contemplated her shining shoes. "I can see that myself. But the people I care about have been good as gold. As for the others I never could satisfy them anyway, could I?"

"Ariadne, you could not," Strickland said fervently.

Ariadne laughed again and her face cleared.

"The creatures I detest," she flashed out, "are not the old people, the Victorians. They're often and often the most sympathetic of all, I suppose because they remember how secretly they had to snatch their liberty when they were young. Anyway they've been darlings. The women I can't stand are the superior young ones who read half a page of André Gide between two rubbers of bridge and are sure they know everything. As for me, I'm old-fashioned. Don't laugh, Strickland," she pleaded wistfully. "I am!"

"I wasn't laughing. I should have called you more than old-fashioned."

"What?"

"Primitive."

Both of them very seriously considered the epithet, for which there was a good deal of reason. Ariadne might call her friends and her lovers by their surnames and jump in a gorgeous riot through all the conventions as though they were so many paper hoops and she on the back of a circus horse. But in the essentials primitive did not inaptly describe her. She proceeded to give her visitor an instance.

"Yes, Ransome's my man," she said. "I have known it ever since one dreadful night in January." She broke off and suddenly gurgled with merriment. "I have *got* to tell you about it."

"I want to hear," said Strickland.

"I went to a party in Chelsea—you know everybody sat on a cushion on the floor and there were barrels of oysters and it took a long while to get going. You know the sort of entertainment. It was quite out of date even then, though a lot of them, including the host, didn't know it. Julian was there, of course."

"So he has a Christian name!" cried Strickland in surprise.

"How can you interrupt me so foolishly!" she exclaimed. "I am telling you something serious. There was a girl on the cushion next to me, and she had a quite new drug. At least she said it was new and no one could contradict her. So of course she was the success of the evening; and as proud as two peacocks. Of course I wanted to try her drug. You can understand that, Strickland, can't you? Yes, but understand it without interrupting," she added hastily.

Strickland did not interrupt and Ariadne resumed her story.

"I had got to try it. She gave me one of her cachets, and nothing happened at all—not the least little bit of an Oriental vision. Oh, I was disappointed! So I borrowed another from her."

"'Borrowed' is good," Strickland interjected.

"And still nothing happened—no wonderful languors—no falling back of the walls and floating away in great spaces of stars—just nothing. So I got annoyed, and took another. Something had got to happen—you see that. And it did. Oh, my dear, in a quarter of an hour I knew that I was dying. I felt—awful, I was sinking down and down into depth after depth. My heart wouldn't beat. I have never known such misery. That was it. It wasn't pain. It was sheer overwhelming misery."

Ariadne clasped her head between her hands and rocked her body. So vivid was her recollection of that evening that she suffered once more the distress which the poison had caused her.

"I was frightened too," she resumed with a gasp, "terribly frightened. I told you that I was old-fashioned, didn't I? I was dying unprepared, with all my sins right on the top of me. Like the King in 'Hamlet,' unhouselled, unanointed, unannealed. And everybody thought I was dying—all except Ransome. The man who gave the party wanted to call up a cab, so that I might die in a taxi rather than upset his old studio by dying there. The girl who gave me the cachets went off into hysterics, and all the rest were running about trying to find remedies which weren't there, and more than half off their heads. All except Julian. He was wonderful."

"What did he do?" asked Strickland and in spite of himself some sharp note of jealousy was very audible in his voice. Ariadne, however, was so completely living over again her unfortunate adventure that she passed it by unnoticed.

"He just sat by my side on a cushion, with his hair unruffled and his tie quite straight, just as if nothing of any importance at all was happening. When I moaned, 'I'm going now! I'm going!' he patted my hand and said, 'Not at all, Ariadne,' just as if I had apologised for treading on his toes. And when I whispered with what I

thought was my last breath, 'Good-bye, my dear,' he replied, 'That'll be all right,' like a man in a shop, when you tell him to take care and see that your parcel reaches home in time for tea. Not a sign of anxiety, you see, and not too much sympathy! Oh, invaluable when every one else was for ringing up an undertaker and ordering my hearse. After an hour or so I began to come up from the depths. Somebody called up a taxi and Ransome drove me home. It was only when we were alone and I was safe that he showed that he too had been afraid. He held me crushed in his arms—he's terribly strong—and all the way home my heart just sang to me, 'This is my man.' "

She stopped. A gust of March wind shook the window panes. The fire in the grate spluttered. Strickland, aware that he must respond to her mood, had nevertheless not a word at his command. The humour with which she had told her little story only threw into greater relief the two pictures which were before his eyes and tortured him. The wise young lover, so wise in his comprehension of her, sitting by her side, neat as a new pin, his hair smooth and the butterfly bow of his white tie not a fraction out of the line, his manner commonplace and unconcerned. And the same young lover a few minutes afterwards holding her crushed in his arms in the cab—"he was so terribly strong." The whole story was in those last words.

Strickland tried to assure himself that this was just what he wanted for her, that it was just for some such consummation that he had started off upon his two years of wandering. But with her so close to him, with her breath upon his cheek, with now a hand, now a knee touching him, and the sound of her clear, fresh voice in his ears, he could not so assuage the fire of jealousy which burnt within him.

Perhaps on that very night when Julian Ransome drove her home crushed in his arms, he, on the veranda of the

bungalow at Mogok, had been maundering over some remote peril threatening her, in which his energy would be engaged—and, of course, triumphantly engaged! Vanity after all—that was all that his fine premonitions in fact amounted to—and a great flame of self-contempt blazed up in him. The peril had been here, in the studio at Chelsea, and young Julian Ransome, not he, had been on the spot to meet it.

Ariadne broke in upon his bitter ruminations in a voice which warned him that his silence hurt her a little.

"What have you to say to me?" she asked.

Strickland took both her hands and bowed his head over them.

"Bravo," he said.

"Thank you," she answered, and his secret was still his.

But the next moment she made it still more difficult for him to keep it.

"Do you know, that I always had an idea that I should marry you," she said, and she quite misunderstood the gasp of his voice and the spasmodic recoil of his shoulders. For she went on with a laugh:

"Oh, don't be afraid! You are quite safe now! But I did imagine that one day you would say to me, 'Ariadne, marry me,' and that I should drop my very prettiest curtsy and answer, 'Thank you, kind sir, and what day shall we fix for the ceremony?'" She fell to silence for a moment, and since there was one still more cruel phrase which it was possible for him to hear, it was fated that on that March morning he should hear it. "What a woeful day it would have been, my dear, for you and me if I had met my Ransome afterwards!"

And still Strickland kept his secret. For he answered and laughed as he answered:

"Twenty-three can't mate with forty-two when there are any number of desirable twenty-sixes and twenty-sevens clamouring for the privilege."

This philosophy, indeed, had been the real cause and

secret of his wanderings. He had thought to leave the field free for youth to capture youth; and that he had done with success. He had believed too that his own inappropriate passion would, in Ariadne's absence, soon diminish to a steady, painless friendship. There, however, his judgment had failed him.

Ariadne rose from the divan with one of her abrupt movements and ran across the room to the piano. She sat down upon the music-stool and, running her fingers over the notes, sang to him a verse of a song. Strickland followed her and looked over her shoulder. The music upon the stand was written in manuscript.

"Is that story true, too?" he asked.

"That I am going to play Sonia the Witch? Of course it is. We open the last week in July."

She sang another verse.

"Isn't there a certain amount of incompatibility," Strickland asked, "between marrying a rising young politician and taking the lead in a musical comedy?"

Ariadne took her hands from the keys. She lifted again the burning cigarette which she had balanced on the edge of the lid of the piano and replaced it between her lips. Then she turned to Strickland with the kindest look of pity upon her face.

"Dear thing," she said gently, "there would have been in the days of Mr. Disraeli."

Then she took him by the sleeve and dragged him back to the divan. The blue of her eyes deepened and softened. A courageous Heart looked at him out of them.

"Listen to me!" she explained. "It's all according to plan. We have between us about twopence-halfpenny a year, if that. Well, a girl can make money at once whilst she's young, a man must have time. That's clear, isn't it? I have just the evanescent sort of qualities which can make money, whilst Julian makes his way. Then my turn will be over and his will begin. I can command a good deal of money, I think, until—perhaps, I am thirty-

one or two. Then I shall stand aside and he will carry on."

In the last words her voice shook, her eyes lost their fine bravery. She was in the grip of some misgiving. She shivered.

"You mean, if he's strong enough?"

"Oh, no, no," Ariadne was quick to reply. "I don't doubt that. No, the fear I have, the fear that all women in love must have, is that when I stand aside, a little tired perhaps, a little worn, no longer the glossy creature you're so amused with, he will leave me behind him."

She sat very still with brooding eyes for a little space of time. Then she jumped up and went over to the window. She stood with her back to him, setting apart the marriages which she knew to have become catastrophes from the marriages where unity had been retained. There were many more of the former category, no doubt, but there were after all not a few of the latter, enough to enhearten her. The first sheen and glamour had worn off no doubt, but the stuff below had been durable enough to keep a couple of hearts warm through many years.

She swung back into the room.

"There!" she cried. "You have now the whole life and adventures of Ariadne Ferne. Tell me something about her friend John Strickland."

"I will," said he, and he fumbled in his pocket. "John Strickland bought a ruby at the ruby mines of Burma."

"For me?" cried Ariadne, clapping her hands.

"For you."

He placed in her hands the little pouch of black velvet, and with a thrill of excitement she opened it. When the great jewel glowed upon the white palm of her slim hand, with such a fire that it seemed her flesh must burn, she uttered a little cry of amazement and delight. Then slowly her face grew serious and her eyes clouded.

"John?" she said in a questioning voice.

The size and beauty of the stone troubled her. She

recalled some curious silences this morning when she had expected a quick and gay reply, some evasions and—yes—a reluctance to meet her eyes.

"John!" she said again. "Let me look at you!"

She took him by the arms and turned him to her so that they stood face to face.

"Oh, my dear," she said in a whisper.

Strickland's secret was his no longer. Ariadne knew, although no word had been spoken, that he had brought to her that morning not merely a ruby but an offer of marriage.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she said gently, and she was filled with consternation at the light words which, upon this very subject, she had this morning used.

She had a thought to give him back the ruby as a present offered to her under a misconception. But her kindness checked her. By taking long thought, she could hardly manage to hurt him more than she would hurt him quite undesignedly, if she refused his gift. On an impulse of compunction, and without a trace of coquetry, she clasped suddenly the ruby against her heart.

"Thank you! I shall treasure this stone very dearly and all my life," she said with a smile.

As she tucked it away into its pouch, with her neat, slim fingers, Strickland had a fancy that she was putting away his heart under a velvet pall. He shook himself with annoyance and climbed back on to the safe ground of practical things.

"But it's to be worn," he said.

"I shall wear it, never fear," she answered, catching his humour. "One doesn't hide priceless rubies under the mattress."

"How will you wear it?"

"It's too big for a ring. It would be lost on a bracelet. I should want another for my ears. As a pendant then."

Strickland looked at his watch.

"Let us walk up Bond Street now and fix it up."

Ariadne nodded and left him standing in the room. She reappeared within a period miraculously short to him who remembered the endurance of cavaliers in the early years of the century. She wore a small bright blue hat upon her head and a dark coat of velours with a great collar of white fox, which framed her small face in snow.

"Come along, Strickland," she cried, and she ran down the stairs in front of him.

CHAPTER SEVEN: *First-hand News of Corinne*

WITH the coming of June, that year, London broke into flowers and warmth. Its old palaces mellowed a little more in the golden sunlight, and something of its old gaiety hesitatingly returned to it. The striped awnings once more decorated the balconies and from the lighted windows of a thousand houses music and a babel of young voices kept the nights awake. Where once the waltz had swooned now was heard the moan of the saxophone and the fox-trot's lilt. Public dinners resumed their tyranny and again the voice of the toast-master was heard in the land.

Strickland dropped into his old place with an ease which rather surprised him. If youth, a little more flamboyant perhaps, a little more avid of enjoyment than it used to be, was inclined to shoulder him out of the way without much ceremony as one of the generation which had made such a dung-heap of the world, he, for his part, had enough sympathy and enough sense of humour to step aside. If the youngsters could do better, good luck to them!

Meanwhile he went where the world went. To Epsom, for instance, on that day of blinding sunshine, when Captain Cuttle won the Derby. There, for the first time, he saw Corinne the famous dancer, amidst a group of people in a private stand by the winning-post.

"Which is she?" he asked with a start when her presence there was announced to him. In the resumption of old and placid interests, the events of Mogok had faded in his recollections; his fears had grown remote and a

little ridiculous. But he was curious enough to wish quite positively to see her.

"The girl in the yellow frock," said his informant.

Strickland looked but was none the wiser. For since she wore a small, tightly-fitting hat which covered her ears and hid her eyes, a pair of orange-coloured cheeks, and a scarlet gash for a mouth, he was totally unable to distinguish her from any other of the thousands of young women who gladdened the race-course with their company.

There, too, a little later on, he stumbled upon Lady Ariadne, who, Bohemian that she was, had preferred to picnic with her lover amongst the other gipsies on the hill.

"Strickland," she cried at the top of her voice. She was sitting on the grass, munching a sandwich out of a paper bag, looking delightfully cool and very much at home. Julian Ransome, on the other hand, laughed a little affectedly as Strickland approached. He seemed to be saying: "For once this is an amusing experience."

"Strickland, I have written to you," cried Ariadne, "and of course you'll come."

Strickland shook his head at her warily.

"I'll see what it is I am to come to, before I promise to come," he replied.

Ariadne made a grimace at him first and kissed her hand to him afterwards.

"How hot you look in those ridiculous clothes," she said, and Strickland, who had been inclined to think that he was looking his best in a new silk hat and a new slim cut-away black coat with a rose in the buttonhole, walked away reduced to his proper proportions.

Ariadne's idea of a letter was a line of half a dozen words scribbled with a pencil across the corner of a holograph invitation to a public dinner. The letter was signed by Lord Culalla, a young and wealthy Australian who had been lately raised to the peerage and was making a stir in

the new world of London. It bade him to a banquet at the Semiramis Hotel given on behalf of the Choral Benevolent Society.

"I have arranged your seat. A. F." This was the extent of Ariadne's letter.

Strickland found it upon his table when he returned from Epsom. He sat down and dutifully wrote out a cheque and an acceptance of the invitation. Whilst he was closing the envelope he became aware that a second letter had arrived for him by that afternoon's post. And the sight of it gave him a queer little shock. For the stamp was Burmese and the postmark Mogok.

It seemed to him a little odd that the letter should have reached him on the very day when he had just seen Corinne, and so immediately after seeing her. He hesitated a little before he opened it.

"After all, it's his affair now," he said to himself, and it was modesty which prompted this reflection. If there were peril for Ariadne in this affair of Maung H'la and Corinne, it was Julian Ransome's business to stand between her and it, not his. The very same day when Ariadne had told him of her engagement, he had made his plan; to stand aside and wish all well for the young couple upon their gallant adventure. He meant to keep within the limits of that plan, close within them—ah, if he could! But Julian Ransome had not a suspicion of any danger portending. If he was to be forewarned, then Strickland himself must know.

He tore open the envelope and turned to the signature. As he expected, the writer was Captain Thorne, and he had some startling news to give.

First of all he repeated his apology for ever having seemed to doubt Strickland's story. A man answering exactly to the Colonel's description had been seen upon the jungle road fifteen miles or so from Mogok, about the very time when the Colonel was buying his ruby. The stranger stopped the public motor and rode to Thabeikyin,

whence he travelled, no doubt as a deck-passenger, on the very boat which carried Strickland down to Mandalay. For he had not been seen since. Then the letter went on:

"Maung H'la's body was found in the jungle two days after you left, and not half a mile from the spot where you waited in your tree. Mr. Brain, of the Forest Department, found it and the tiger at the same time, and was fortunate enough to kill the tiger. As for Maung H'la, it is supposed that the tiger killed him. At all events, nothing could be proved to the contrary. Brain, however, thinks——"

And then came, for Strickland, who remembered well the caution of Captain Thorne, a most illuminating alteration. After he had written "Brain, however, thinks ——" Thorne had broken off and scratched the words out, yet left them legible. So the careful Officer of Police said what he meant to say and committed himself to no statement at all. Strickland could not but smile at so ingenious a way of conveying to him that Maung H'la died by another agency than a tiger's claws. The letter continued, indeed, even more explicitly:

"His neck was broken. And of course a gentle pat of the tiger's paw would have broken it, just as easily as—say, the sort of club your stranger was carrying. I hold no views upon the matter. Maung H'la was certainly mauled by the tiger. So no case could lie. But the greatest sportsman who ever shot big game in Burma did write that there could not be a greater fallacy than the old superstition that a tiger never ate anything not killed by himself." This last sentence was underlined.

There the letter ended, and there was the truth uttered in Thorne's very own special and particular way. Maung H'la had been caught up and murdered in the jungle on the very night when Strickland was sitting out on his *machan,* in the tree, and not half a mile from where he watched; had been murdered silently and sud-

denly, and by that grim Satan with the club in his hand, perhaps—nay, almost certainly, only a few minutes before he had stood out in the glade with the moonlight glistening upon his eyes. Strickland sat with the letter in his hands, and all his forebodings crowding back into his mind. The tremendous event! That is what he had called it—aye, even before it had happened. And here was the loom of it once more in the sky like the glare of a fire on land to a sailor in the dark of the seas. Here it was threatening Corinne the dancer, whose gay plumage had helped to brighten Epsom that afternoon, and through her friendship, reaching out towards the sacred person of Ariadne Ferne—involving her, perhaps, in a dreadful scandal which even she could not carry off.

There was a knock upon the door, and Strickland's servant announced that Mr. Julian Ransome would like to see him. Strickland jumped up with alacrity. Here was the very man to whom this mystery must be confided.

"Show him in," he cried, and Julian Ransome was ushered into the room.

He was a tall, dark young man with a pair of keen grey eyes, a little stiff in the back, perhaps, a little pompous in manner, too. But these characteristics, no doubt, were the outward and visible signs of a political career in the making.

"Back from Epsom already?" said Strickland genially. "You have left the moke and the coster's cart at the door, I suppose. Shall I send down some one to look after it?"

"We only hired it for the day," answered Ransome, falling in not very easily with Strickland's humour. "I have come to see you about that dinner at the Semiramis Hotel on behalf of the Choral Benevolent Society." He raised a forefinger in the air as if he were addressing a public meeting. "Ariadne is very anxious that you should

go. A great friend of hers, Culalla, is taking the chair. She wants to make the dinner a success."

"I'm going," Strickland answered. He pointed grimly to the envelope stamped and addressed upon his table. "The Banqueting Room of the Semiramis Hotel is the modern synonym for Hounslow Heath."

Julian Ransome was at once lost in reflection. He stroked his smoothly-shaven face, his eyes were aloof.

"What's the matter?" Strickland inquired, and he was forced to repeat his question, before Ransome, with a laugh of deprecation, shook himself out of his abstraction.

"I was wondering whether I could use that phrase on a platform," he said. "In my dreadful calling one goes scouting for epigrams like a seagull after a meal."

"It's not a very good one," said Strickland.

"It doesn't have to be," Ransome returned. "With epigrams, as with human beings, the good are not always the most useful."

"No doubt," said Strickland, and now he, too, had fallen into an abstraction, with his letter spread out before his eyes.

This was the moment to relate his story, and hand over his trust to its proper guardian. He was sure of it. Therefore he had absently said just now, "No doubt!" Yet doubt had been growing upon him none the less ever since Ransome had entered the room. He imagined himself telling his story. How vaporous and fantastical it would sound! It was an account of his moods rather than a statement of facts. And would his moods make any appeal to Julian Ransome? Ariadne's own explanation of how her engagement came about in the studio at Chelsea showed him as a composed, practical, matter-of-fact young man, not at all inclined to take shares in a fancy; and he left just that impression of himself independently on John Strickland's mind.

"Won't he treat the whole story as mere moonshine?" he asked himself; and he admitted ruefully that moonshine did in any case enter largely into it.

The facts were few enough—the quest and murder of Maung H'la by the alarming stranger and some vague connection of him through Maung H'la with Ariadne's friend Corinne.

"Even if he listens seriously," Strickland's speculations ran on, "wouldn't Ransome be just the man to take the fatal step of trying to exercise authority over Ariadne to make her break off her friendship with the dancer?"

Perhaps, after all, he had so much authority!

In his perplexities Strickland asked a question directly.

"Do you know Corinne?"

There was just a perceptible pause before Ransome answered.

"Of course I do."

"Is she French?"

"No, English. Corinne is a name."

The answers were short. Corinne was clearly a subject which Mr. Ransome did not wish to improve. Strickland, however, pursued it.

"What's your opinion of her?"

The pause was now even more perceptible.

"She is a friend of Ariadne's," he replied at last.

Strickland nodded his head.

"And then?"

Ransome took a step nearer to the table, and plunging his hands into his pockets, faced his questioner.

"And then—once more—Corinne is a friend of Ariadne's," he said in a firm and even voice.

Strickland laughed cordially. He could have wished for no other reply from the future guardian of the Trust. He would transfer the charge of it now and here. He picked up his letter to begin his story, when Ransome must needs spoil altogether the effect which he had produced and check the words on Strickland's lips.

"All that has got to end, of course," he continued. "I have let it go on. But it won't do."

Well, Strickland reflected, Ariadne had herself foreseen that changes must come. During the first years she was to make the pace, afterwards Ransome was to go ahead. Only, if he sought to take the lead too soon he might spoil a fine race altogether.

"It will end in the natural order of things, no doubt," said Strickland.

"Sooner than that," Julian Ransome answered.

"Have you ever known Ariadne deliberately to drop a friend!" Strickland asked.

"Everything must have a beginning," Ransome retorted easily as he walked away to the hearth-rug.

Strickland thoughtfully folded up his letter and put it away in a drawer. He might be right and he might be wrong. But it seemed now to him that Ransome would use the story of Maung H'la's end and its menace to Corinne prematurely, rashly, and set up Ariadne still more publicly as Corinne's champion and associate.

"You can form your own opinion of Corinne, Colonel Strickland," said Ransome from the hearth-rug. "For you are going to meet her yourself."

Strickland swung round in his chair and stared at his visitor.

"It's the first I have heard of it," he exclaimed.

Ransome smiled.

"I should have thought you knew Ariadne well enough to realise that the first anybody hears of anything is after she has decided that it shall happen. When this bore of a dinner is over, we are all to go on to the 'Noughts and Crosses.'"

"Good God, what's that?" cried Strickland. "A public house in the King's Road?"

Julian Ransome looked at him with pity. During the last three months, however, Strickland had been getting

used to that look upon the faces of the younger generation.

"No," Ransome explained very seriously and patiently. "The 'Noughts and Crosses' is the newest and brightest and best of the Night Clubs. The 'Noughts' stand for the men, you see, and the 'Crosses' for the women. A pronounced humorist, who has written a book, invented the name. The cooking is excellent, the one and only Rudelli manages it—and Corinne dances there."

Strickland jumped up with an eagerness which surprised his companion.

"Does she, indeed? I shall be introduced to her then?"

"You certainly will." Ransome gazed reflectively at the Colonel as he added with an air of deprecation. "But, perhaps, you would be wiser not to entertain too high hopes."

"Oh, I won't," Strickland assured him. "But even the most courted of damsels may throw a pitying word to an antediluvian curiosity."

Ransome was very gentle with him. Very gentle and patient and courteous, and if his sense of humour was not very highly developed, one had no right to feel a disappointment.

"You have not quite grasped my meaning," he explained. "There is a Spaniard, Leon Battchilena. You will no doubt meet him at the dinner, too. For he is, according to his friends, a remarkable musician. Had he been a professional according to his friends—Paderewski must have taken to the oboe for very shame. For myself," and suddenly Julian Ransome's cheeks flamed and his voice grew violent, "I think he is the most unspeakable bounder I ever came across. In any company he must bear down every one. Flashy and vain, but for the women he would never be allowed. He must be in love with the very latest favourite. That's his creed and principle. Publicity in love, you understand. Corinne's the latest favourite. So every one must be forced

to say, 'See that man? That's Battchilena. He's in love with Corinne.' "

"And Corinne responds?" Strickland asked.

"If the latest favourite doesn't respond," Ransome answered, "Battchilena proposes passionately to blow out his brains upon her hearth-rug. They fall for it. He knows the kind of woman he pursues—none better"; and suddenly Ransome brought his fist down upon the mantelshelf.

"It's all got to end," he declared, and with a word of farewell, he passed out of the room.

. . . . . .

Strickland remained for a while plunged in perplexity and distress. Not by that hot spirit was the dimly shadowed peril to be exorcised. Ariadne could always be guaranteed to match spirit with spirit. At the risk of playing the odious part of Mr. Busybody, he himself must after all figure in the cast. There had been a woman who died. Yes, Thorne had spoken her name to him in the jungle road just outside Mogok, had advised him to look up the details of the inquest. He had even forgotten the name of that woman—so dim and fanciful had his premonitions become to him during these last months. But as he sat there and recalled that edge of the road, and his motor-car stopping at Thorne's signal, and Thorne's approach to the side of the car, Thorne's words returned to him too—and the name. Yes, the name as well. He would set about that work in the morning.

He rose up greatly relieved and rang for his servant. But there remained with him still a little surprise at Ariadne's choice of a husband. He could not quite reconcile the man, as he saw him, with Ariadne's account of him. But, of course, he reasoned, the only people who knew the truth of men were the women to whom they made love; and the women never told until they had quarrelled.

CHAPTER EIGHT: *Elizabeth Clutter's Mistake*

THE number of a bachelor's clubs increases as imperceptibly as the tale of his years. One of them he really uses; he occasionally lunches at a second; and at the others he gets his coat brushed if he happens to pass the door. It was towards the second kind of club that John Strickland walked about the hour of luncheon—a small club housed in a small old mansion in a quiet street behind a roaring thoroughfare. It was not identified with any one profession. Indeed, a catholicity in its membership was the chief reason of its existence. Cabinet Ministers in distress could take a meal there safe from the importunities of their followers, and newspaper editors without being pestered to reveal their secrets.

Strickland was in luck that morning. For the very man he wanted got out of a cab and mounted the steps at his side, a heavily-built man with a large, jovial face and a voice like the bark of a big, good-humoured dog.

"Strickland!" he cried, "I haven't seen you for a couple of years."

"I haven't been visible for a couple of years."

"Anything wrong?"

"Nothing but what you can put right."

"I am fortunate," said the other with a laugh. "Let us lunch together and make what we can of your trouble."

Henry Murchison was the editor of that famous newspaper *The Flame,* and twenty-five years in a position where mistakes as to facts are not allowed had made his memory at once prodigious and exact. He chose a table in the window, and when his luncheon was before him,

and his invariable tankard within the reach of his hand, he shook himself genially and barked:

"Well! Fire away! What can I do?"

"You can tell me about an inquest."

Murchison looked up with interest.

"An inquest? But can I? I don't know."

"It was an inquest upon a Mrs. Clutter—a Mrs. Elizabeth Clutter, and it was held about eighteen months ago."

Henry Murchison ran a finger down the index of his memories.

"Yes, there was such an inquest," he replied at length. "It was held in the Isle of Wight. But at a time not very helpful to you."

"Why?" Strickland asked anxiously.

"It was held in the midst of a general election."

"But you will have a report of it in your file."

Murchison looked dubious.

"A very short one. Little more, probably, than a statement of the verdict. We were full up at the time with speeches and policies, fat speeches and thin policies. We couldn't reduce the one, and we had to try to build up the other. There wasn't much room left for inquests in the Isle of Wight."

Strickland's heart sank. There was always some infernal obstacle in the way. First, Thorne's scruples and reticence, now the coincidence of a general election. Murchison, looking at his companion over the rim of his tankard, understood how deep was his disappointment.

"Ask me a question or two," he suggested. "I might remember something."

"Very well, I will," Strickland returned. He had the one question ready on his tongue, which must provoke Murchison's recollections, if they could be provoked at all. "How was Corinne concerned in it?"

"Corinne!"

Murchison's face cleared like magic.

"Oho! Wait a moment!" he cried, and he buried his

face in his hands for a minute and then looked out of the window for a minute with his mouth pursed up and his forehead in a frown. "I have got it," he said at length, and corrected himself—"at least I have got the proved facts of it. I don't propose to go behind them."

"I don't ask you to," Strickland agreed.

"Very well," said Murchison, and whilst he ate, he talked. "Mrs. Elizabeth Clutter was a well-to-do, youngish woman, very neurotic, very lonely. She had a small house in South Audley Street and a bigger house just outside Yarmouth in the Isle of Wight, and divided her time between them."

"She was a widow?" Strickland interposed.

Murchison reflected for a moment. He looked again out of the window, and then gazed straight into Strikland's eyes.

"I don't know. She may have been. She may, on the other hand, only have been separated from her husband. She was alone, at all events. Let me tell my story my own way."

Strickland had an impression that the editor knew something more about Elizabeth Clutter's widowhood than he was ready to admit.

"I am sorry," he said.

"She was alone," Murchison resumed, "until Corinne came to live with her. Women of that kind are prone to violent friendships which have a very short life. Corinne was the favourite of the moment. She was not the Corinne of to-day. Rudelli hadn't taken her up. Gran, her present dancing partner, hadn't polished her. She was poor, pretty as a peach, of course, but with a good many intervals between her engagements. Yes?"

He broke off because he saw Strickland struggling to suppress a question.

"What is it?"

"I was wondering how Corinne and Elizabeth Clutter became acquainted."

"That was stated. Corinne had an engagement to dance at an hotel in Brighton one Christmas when Mrs. Clutter was staying there. The resulting friendship we shall recognise to have been inevitable if we remember the great pearl of wisdom which fell from the lips of the claimant, the late lamented Mr. Orton."

"I never heard it," Strickland remarked.

"'Some has money and some has brains. Them that has money was made for them that has brains,'" Henry Murchison quoted. "So Corinne made her home with Elizabeth Clutter. But"—and he wagged a forefinger in the air to emphasise his statement—"let us be quite clear about this. Corinne was dancing in a cabaret show in London on the night when Elizabeth Clutter, in the Isle of Wight, reached out her hand in the dark and drank a tumblerful of disinfectant instead of the sleeping draught which usually stood there."

Strickland leaned back in his chair with a gasp.

"So that's it!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," Murchison returned in a far more indifferent voice. "It's an accident which has happened not a few times, but never under conditions so unimpeachable. Elizabeth Clutter slept with a whole pharmacopœia of remedies by her bedside. Nothing is more probable than that she took the wrong glass by mistake. The alternative is that being an ailing melancholy neurotic woman, she took the wrong glass on purpose."

Strickland, however, was not so easily satisfied. He held his ground.

"It was suggested, wasn't it, that Maung H'la had changed the glasses——?" he said.

Murchison shot a quick glance at the persevering cross-examiner on the other side of the table.

"Maung H'la? Oh, yes, the Burmese servant! He had a record of nine or ten years of faithful service. I never heard that that suggestion was made."

Strickland continued, working the case out in his mind as he went along.

"And that Corinne had arranged her alibi for the occasion?"

"Corinne took her engagements when and where she could get them," Murchison returned. "A conspiracy between her and the Burmese servant was, so far as I remember, never even hinted at during the inquest."

Murchison called a waiter to clear the plates away, and to place matches and an ash-tray upon the table. He pulled a large cigar case from his pocket and held it out to Strickland. But whilst these preparations were being made, he stole now and again a quick shrewd glance across the table, as though he made a guess why all these questions were fired at him.

Strickland waited until the waiter had gone and his cigar was lit before he ceased from musketry, and took to his hand-grenade.

"And yet," he said slowly, "both Corinne and Maung H'la, the faithful servant, nearly stood in the dock to answer to a capital charge."

Henry Murchison was undoubtedly startled. He took his cigar from his lips and stared at Strickland with his lips pursed up in a way he had.

"You know that?" he barked.

"Yes."

"Then you know a damned sight more about the case than I do."

He replaced his cigar, and after smoking for a little while, spoke as one making a concession:

"Of course there's always certain to be some talk and, perhaps, some suspicion when one of these deaths occurs and an unexpected person inherits——"

"Ah!" Strickland interposed quickly. "That's what I wanted to know. Then Corinne inherited——"

"Everything, the house in London, the house in the

Isle of Wight, the stocks and shares—the whole bag of tricks."

"So I supposed," Strickland returned. Yet some doubt troubled him.

Through the window he watched with meticulous attention a pedestrian along fifty yards of pavement, but could never have described that pedestrian, nor was he aware that he watched any one at all.

"You see—what I don't understand, if she inherited all this money—no, I can't follow it!"

"What's your trouble?" Murchison asked.

"Corinne's still dancing."

Murchison laughed heartily, and raised his tankard in homage.

"May the bloom never fade from your innocence!" he cried. "Corinne dances. Her passion for her art compels her to. She says so in every interview. We say so in every paragraph. So it must be true. Besides," he added, dryly, "Corinne has a lover."

Strickland nodded.

"Battchilena?"

"Yes. Battchilena! And Corinne and Battchilena between them could eat up a nice little fortune during the time it took you to eat up a nice little luncheon. Corinne is like this tankard," he said, peering regretfully into its depths. "Outwardly nothing could be more respectable, for it looks as if it held or had held a pint of ale. Internally it's vice itself, for it holds, or did hold, a pint of champagne, and nothing can be more vicious than champagne in the middle of the day."

He put the tankard, now quite empty, down again upon the table.

"And now, perhaps, you'll tell me why you are so interested in the little affair of Corinne and Mrs. Elizabeth Clutter," he said.

Strickland answered readily enough.

"I have a couple of friends whom I greatly value, and

if this little affair were to take a new turn I am afraid that the fortunes of those two friends might be very much damaged by the scandal."

He foresaw no danger more serious than that at the moment. But he did foresee that very clearly. From the facts of the inquest as they had been stated by Murchison, there was not to be extracted the merest shadow of a plea which could persuade so staunch a spirit as Ariadne Ferne to contract her friendship with Corinne. She would, on the contrary, flaunt it the more noisily, if any attempt were made to persuade her. There lay the peril, and Strickland spoke with a quiet and simple earnestness which moved his companion to a strong sympathy.

"It's possible," said Murchison with a smile, "that if I set my wits to work, I might guess correctly who your two friends are. And I agree. A scandal in which Corinne was so gravely concerned might do the whole of the little set in which Corinne moves a certain amount of harm, and your two friends in particular. They are on the by-paths with the big high-road very close, but not yet reached. A wrong turn now, and they might tramp a blind alley for the rest of their lives, what? Yes, but the whole affair's over—over, eighteen months ago. It can't take a new turn."

Strickland, however, was not reassured. He shook his head.

"I should like to be as sure of that as you," he returned slowly. "Just listen to this! After the inquest Maung H'la was sent back to Burma. I don't say that he was deported by an order. No, he wasn't. But he was none the less definitely sent back by the authorities. He took work as a gardener at the ruby mines. Then one day he saw a man, a white man, coming along the road, and in a panic he hid. The white man, a complete stranger, stopped and inquired for him. Maung H'la bolted and made for his native village, hidden away in the jungle. The stranger followed him. Four days after-

wards Maung H'la was found dead. A very cautious man sent the news to me, but he meant to leave me in no doubt that Maung H'la had been murdered."

"Though it couldn't be proved, eh?"

"Though it couldn't be proved."

"And the stranger?"

"He took the river steamer to Mandalay and disappeared."

Murchison turned this unexpected incident over in his mind. His face became grave.

"Yes, that does alter the look of things, doesn't it?" he said. "Sounds like mischief, what? I tell you what you might do. You might come down with me to the office now. I have an idea that we might catch the reporter who went down to that inquest."

Strickland accepted the proposition with a warmth of gratitude which Henry Murchison was no longer at a loss to account for; and five minutes later the two men left the club together.

CHAPTER NINE: *A Lost Opportunity*

IN a narrow lane at the back of Fleet Street, the great edifice of *The Flame* newspaper pulsed and thudded like an ocean liner. Even at this hour of the afternoon its passages were thronged with clerks and reporters and compositors, all of them in a tremendous hurry. The lifts clanged up and down from the fifth floor to the basement, vans accumulated round the block, bales of paper were carried in, and such a clatter and bustle of affairs permeated the building as convinced Strickland that surely the country must come to an end that night unless *The Flame* was issued before twelve o'clock. Murchison, however, moved through the turmoil with an Olympian calm, and led his companion to his own quiet room upon the first floor. He spoke upon a telephone.

"Will you bring me all that we have got about the inquest on Mrs. Elizabeth Clutter?" he commanded, and within a space of time which seemed to Strickland amazingly brief, a clerk came into the room with a large square envelope. Within the envelope there was just one cutting and that a short one.

"There you are!"

Murchison placed Strickland in his chair, laid the cutting before him and went out of the room. But the report did no more than confirm the accuracy of Murchison's memory. It was not even as complete. There had apparently been not one moment of sensation. Corinne had answered all the questions put to her by the coroner with no more than the distress natural to the occasion. Maung H'la, speaking very good English, had accounted for all his movements upon the night of Elizabeth Clutter's death. The verdict, "Death by Misad-

venture," followed inevitably. All was slab and drab and as innocent as could be.

"Yet Maung H'la was sent back to Burma," Strickland cried in exasperation. "Yet he did come near to standing in the dock, with Corinne by him."

The pressure of space due to the progress of a general election was all very well. But there was reserve—yes, a note of reserve about the whole conduct of the proceedings—which was unusual—very unusual. He leaned back in his chair, whilst the great building throbbed and vibrated. He was carried away to the deck of the ship where on his journey home he had brooded through so many starry evenings upon Thorne's hints and his own fears. Was he reading into this report suspicions born of his ceaseless conjectures during the days and nights between Bombay and Port Said, between Port Said and Marseilles? He rose up from the chair, irritated to the point where he could not remain seated, where he must walk from the table to the window and from the window to the table, like a bear in its cage. In the midst of his pacing, Murchison again entered the room. He was followed by a young, red-headed man with a sharp pale face, into which some of the red of his hair seemed to have run.

"This," said Murchison, "is Mr. Angus Trevor, who reported the inquest," and once again he left the room.

Mr. Angus Trevor sat down at the end of the table and, reaching over, picked up the cutting. He read it through carefully, put it down again with a nod, and scratched his head slowly and methodically.

"Yes," he said, with his eyes turned inwards. "Yes, that's about it. Not so bad either."

Strickland stopped his pacing.

"But is that all? Did nothing more happen which you didn't report?"

Mr. Trevor took no offence at the abruptness of the question. Strickland's distress was too obviously sincere. Trevor was familiar enough, from the experience of in-

numerable interviews, with performances of the various emotions to be able to appreciate a genuine one when he saw it.

"I don't think so," he replied. "You see, I know very well that the public's a carnivorous beast, and would much rather that I served up Corinne piping hot on a silver dish than that I gave it pap. Well, all this is pap. Well, then, I had to give it pap. Well, then, obviously pap was all that I had to give."

Strickland took another turn to the window and back again. He stopped at the end of the table opposite to Angus Trevor.

"What about Clutter, the husband?" he asked.

"Oh, Clutter didn't come upon the scene at all. I suppose Clutter was dead," replied Angus Trevor easily.

"But you are not sure? I have a reason for asking."

Angus Trevor scratched his head again. "Wait a bit," he said, and he took up the cutting once more and studied it with care. "Oh, yes! Miss Corinne didn't know whether Clutter was alive or dead. I don't know why I left it out. Perhaps there wasn't room. She described Mrs. Clutter as subject to fits of remorse. Apparently, she and her husband had not hit it off very well. She had a morbid sense of guilt and since she did not volunteer any statement, Corinne did not question her."

"Oh!" Strickland exclaimed. Here, at all events, was the promise of a new explanation. Elizabeth Clutter might have deliberately killed herself. Strickland grasped at it eagerly. He might have been very sorry for Elizabeth Clutter had he known her. But he had not. His concern was solely with certain living people, and this explanation, if it were only true, would save them from all the discredit, the touch of infamy which he feared.

"So there was a suggestion of suicide?" he cried hopefully.

"Corinne certainly suggested it," Trevor answered in a very dry tone. "But the jury didn't agree."

No, nor did the police, since they were within an ace of putting Corinne upon her trial. Nor did the stranger who had pursued Maung H'la into the jungle and made his account with him there. Strickland's hope was as the seed which sprang up in a night and withered away. He flung himself disconsolately down in his chair again.

"There's something about this report which I don't understand, Mr. Trevor," he said, "even allowing for the general election."

Mr. Trevor was politely curious.

"It seems to me all straight to the point," he said after consulting it again.

"Too straight to the point," Strickland retorted. "What I know about coroners is, to be sure, not very much. But I have always understood them to be laws unto themselves. Rather meddlesome people, on the whole. Talkative people, overbearing people, and rather insolent in their virtue. Every little peccadillo twenty years old perhaps and with no real bearing on the case must be dragged up out of its grave and gibbeted. But this coroner seems to have been a very mirror of circumspection. Not a question about the husband, who he was, whether he was dead, whether, if he was dead, he and his wife were separated before he died, when he died, of what he died, where he died. I should have expected this coroner to be busily prying into all these details; and I am bound to say, I wish to heaven he had been."

Trevor hitched up his chair to the table.

"There was a reason for that," he exclaimed.

"I would like to hear it," said Strickland.

"You were out of England at the time. Yes. You would be surprised," he agreed.

A little time before this inquest, a coroner had overstepped even the latitude assumed by coroners. He had extracted from an unhappy woman, who was the merest witness to a death, that she had never been married to the man with whom she was living, and that their

grown-up daughter was illegitimate. He had then belaboured her for her deceit, accused her of perjury for assuming the man's name, and threatened her with prison, though he had no power to send her there.

"There was an uproar in the Press," Angus Trevor continued. "A famous author joined in. An ex-Lord Chancellor rapped that coroner over the knuckles until he must have felt sick and dizzy. And the whole tribe of them suddenly acquired a little much-needed modesty. This man, for instance, in the Isle of Wight, was treading very delicately. The husband, whether alive or dead, did not come into the picture. That was enough for him. He kept his inquiry within the circle of the facts."

"I see," said Strickland, and once more he sprang up and betook himself to pacing between the table and the window. He was like a man in a maze. At every turn, when he was saying to him, "At last I am coming to the heart and centre of this puzzle"—no—he was face to face again with a hedge. First Thorne's obstinate scruples, then the coincidence of a general election with Elizabeth Clutter's death, now the coroner's unusual reticence—always there was something to stop him from the truth. And he must reach it! He felt that as an obligation laid upon him. He imagined disaster falling upon Ariadne, her gallant adventure altogether spoilt. He looked out of the window and saw her face there before him, without a sparkle of its gaiety and her eyes wistful and yet tender with reproach. Quite unreasonably, the very accumulation of these obstacles in his way increased his conviction that peril was approaching her. In a panic he saw it approaching, a black menacing cloud overwhelming the sky. He was lost to all knowledge of the room in which he stood, he was unaware of Trevor's curious glances. He had suddenly leapt forward with his fears for wings.

It was no longer mere scandal, mere discredit, a mere barrier against advancement which he envisaged, but some dreadful tornado in the midst of which, amdist the clamours of thunder, and the blinding glares of lightning,

she must be fought for against the Powers of Darkness—chief amongst them a gaunt, hungry spectre of a man, armed with a cudgel which could break but not be broken.

The vision passed. The room swam into his sight again. He recognised Trevor standing by the table, with his eyes now discreetly lowered.

"I thank you very much," said Strickland with a smile. "It was kind of you to give me these details."

The conference was over, but Trevor did not take his leave. He showed an evident embarrassment and a no less evident good-will.

"I don't want to butt in, Colonel Strickland," he said, "and I haven't one idea, nor do I seek to have one, as to why you are interested in the death of Elizabeth Clutter. But I do sincerely think that you are barking up the wrong tree."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Surely the person who deserves attention is Corinne?"

Strickland took out his cigarette-case and offered a cigarette to his companion. He was still a little absent in his manner.

"Do you know her?" he asked.

Mr. Trevor stopped in the middle of lighting his cigarette and stared at Strickland—stared until the match burnt his fingers.

"Of course," he explained patiently. "The moment she returned to London I went straight as a Roman road to her dressing-room."

"Oh! Then she told you something," Strickland interjected.

"She told me exactly what I expected, and what I reported, and what I disbelieved. She said every right thing. She was overwhelmed, but her duty to the public must come first. She danced whilst her heart broke. Pretty sad, what? I could have wept. But I didn't. I consoled myself with the impression that she had the brightest pair of little eyes for a cash-deposit that I had

ever seen. It isn't, of course, likely that Corinne would be foolish. But I should, I think—if I was interested in the matter—yes, I certainly should inquire whether just before this—accident, Corinne ever hinted that she expected to come into a handsome sum of money pretty soon. It's the sort of little slip which people do make, especially if they are in debt and are being pressed to pay."

With the gift of that advice Mr. Angus Trevor took his sharp red head out of the room. He had reached the corner where the lane discharged itself into Fleet Street before he came to a stop. He liked Strickland. There was an ease, a frankness, a cordiality, something, anyhow, a freedom from jealousies and little things, which made a strong appeal to him. And there was not a doubt about his distress. Trevor had just remembered something—oh, nothing very important—an address merely—but an address which, wisely made use of, might help Strickland and one way or another settle his perplexities. It offered an opportunity, at all events, which a man like Strickland would never get hold of unless a man like himself made him a present of it. He, Trevor, had only obtained this address by some very persistent espionage. For it was, very wisely, kept a close secret. Yes, Strickland should have the benefit of this item of inside knowledge. Whether he could make profitable use of it or not, well, that was not Trevor's affair. He would have done his best to help a man and a brother.

Trevor turned smartly back and returned to the office of *The Flame*. But, quickly though he walked, Strickland had already gone when he arrived. As a matter of fact, Strickland had passed behind him whilst he stood deliberating upon his course on the kerb of the pavement in Fleet Street; had almost touched him on the shoulder and wished him good day. But he had not yielded to the impulse. He had just walked on and the address was not entrusted to him until a later day had come.

CHAPTER TEN: *Terror at the Semiramis*

THE dinner at the Semiramis Hotel was certain to be one of the most notable events of that season from the hour when Lord Culalla consented to take the chair.

"This banquet has got to produce the Society's record subscription. See to it!" he announced in his curiously metallic voice to his little army of camp followers and satellites. But he was not content with giving this order. He saw to it also himself.

He was such a man as each age begets and each age claims as its own peculiar product, accounting him a sign of progress or an evidence of degeneration, according to the divisions of its political opinions. Only fifteen years ago, a mere Mr. Gideon Bramber from the back blocks of Australia, he had swept into London, a man still under thirty years of age, quite unknown, but with a substantial fortune already built up out of nothing and a bosomful of limitless ambitions. He had the two great qualities which make for great success, the power to attract money and the power to keep friends. As to the latter, it was said of him that he might drop friends—and, indeed, he had a touch of the Sultan's caprices—but that his friends never dropped him. As to the former quality—indefinable, unteachable, a gift found in association with any degree of intellect, Bœotian, vulgar, or razor sharp—Mr. Gideon Bramber undoubtedly possessed it. He was a magnet, before he became a magnate. Place a sovereign on a table, midway between him and me, and of its own accord it would presently begin to move towards his hand. But he did not live for the gift. It was to him a lever, a weapon, a thing to use, an opportunity of spreading out in a thousand activities. He entered Parliament, became

a Minister, in due course a peer. He bought a newspaper, and then another, and then another, directed them, wrote for them, achieved a circulation for them, and meanwhile made another fortune out of spelter and a third, or a fourth, or a fifth—no one could tell which—out of rubber and an extra one out of artificial silk. In the midst of all these engagements he found time to achieve a culture of his own, founded largely upon a knowledge of the Bible. On the other hand, he was too busy a man for the drawing-rooms, and took his relaxations in a less formal company. He was close upon six feet high, a little heavy about the shoulders, with a sleek black head and a sallow clean-shaven face; and as he stood in the reception-room welcoming the ambassadors, and the bishops, the stars and the ribbons and the medals, whom he had gathered to the banquet, he had rather the look of a polite buccaneer asking for their purses. . . .

"My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, dinner is served," a stentorian voice belonging to the toastmaster, dressed in a scarlet coat like a master of fox-hounds, announced, and the company passed through the door in a tight wedge and spread out like water through a dam.

"We are all together round the end of the top table," Ariadne began, and stopped short with a little cry of dismay. "Oh!"

For in the very corner, in the midst of the seats for which she had stipulated, a thin, narrow-shouldered elderly man with *pince-nez* bridging his nose, had just taken his seat.

A man spoke at Ariadne's elbow.

"I am very sorry, Lady Ariadne. I am the secretary. I had to alter the arrangements at the last moment. He is a Mr. Julius Ricardo, very rich, but a little unmanageable. It was really necessary to put him at the high table."

"Ricardo? Ricardo!" Strickland repeated the name to himself. "Now, where have I heard that name?"

Ariadne was gazing at the man ruefully.

"I shall hate him, I know," she said to the secretary. "You have quite spoilt my party."

The secretary smiled his apologies.

"I hope not. I understand that Mr. Ricardo can be quite entertaining if he begins to talk about crime. He is a great friend of the famous French detective Hanaud, and visits him in France when any sensational trial takes place."

"Hanaud!" exclaimed Strickland. "To be sure!"

He remembered now how he came to be familiar with Julius Ricardo's name. There had been a case at Aix-les-Bains which had brought Hanaud into contact with a Mr. Ricardo. "But it was before your day, Ariadne," he added.

"I don't care!" she said indignantly. "He won't entertain me!"

Alas, Mr. Ricardo entertained nobody that evening, and towards the end of the dinner not even himself. Strickland was seated next to Madame Chrestoff, a young and brilliant *prima donna* from, it was supposed, Czecho-Slovakia; next to her sat Mr. Ricardo; then came Ariadne, Leon Battchilena and Julian Ransome. Thus Mr. Ricardo was in the midst of them, and he seized upon them with the soup, silenced them and held them, like the Ancient Mariner, but not with a glittering eye. The secret of Mr. Ricardo's spell was a thin penetrating copious flow of words, banality upon banality, and all expounding his exiguous personality.

"Dear me!" he said, emphasising his remarks with little precise bird-like gestures, "a few years ago, to have sat through a public dinner in company however charming, with speeches to follow, whilst the music of dances was being played in the outer room, would have seemed to me the very height and crown of treachery. Every throb of the violins would have been poignant with reproach, would have cried, 'Dance, Ricardo, dance!' But now I

find myself enjoying it. *Eheu fugaces, Posthume, Posthume!* this *sole à la Marguery,* this *cancton à la Presse,* this glass of Lafitte which I hold up to the light to enjoy its ruby hues. What would they have all meant to me years ago! Lafitte, even Lafitte, 1900, would have been no more to me than the occasion of a foolish joke. I might have said: 'To the accompaniment of a waltz, we ought certainly to drink La-feet';" and he punctuated with a reedy laugh this devastating example of his wit.

Madame Chrestoff watched him with round eyes and a perplexed forehead. Once she said: "My!" and a little afterwards: "Goodness to goodness!" and now she said "Gee!" in an awe-struck voice; and all of these interjections struck upon Strickland as singular, coming from Czecho-Slovakia. But interjections meant less than nothing to Mr. Ricardo. He trod them down as a battleship treads down beneath its forefoot a piece of wreckage in the sea. Ariadne's glances of wrath he never saw. He was not aware of her. He was aware only of so many pairs of ears entirely at his mercy as a bandit might be who had just captured a caravan of tourists in the mountains.

To the relief of all that party the stentorian voice rang out again.

"My Lords, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, pray charge your glasses, and silence for your Chairman, the Lord Culalla!"

During the reprieve of the loyal toasts, every one of them took a stern resolution that Mr. Ricardo should not get his head loose again; and the moment the company sat down again they broke out at once. The Society, music, any topic which could sweep over and drown Mr. Ricardo. Madame Chrestoff described how she walked out of the Imperial Opera House because a rival *prima donna* had kicked her puppy in the corridor.

"I said to the Herr Direktor: 'Don't talk to me! No

armour-plated Brynehilda is going to kick my Sealyham dawg, and as for your little old Opera House, it's a bum place anyways,' and I went back to my hotel and cried from rage—oh, outrageous!—until my nose was as red as that carbuncle on Ariadne's chest!"

Strickland giggled with delight. The carbuncle was his priceless ruby, which glowed against the pale gold tissue of Ariadne's frock like a great blot of fire, and waxed and waned with every movement that she made.

"What are you laughing at?" Madame Chrestoff asked.

"I wasn't laughing so much," he replied gravely, "as thinking that, but for your accent and idioms, I might have taken you for an American citizen."

Madame Chrestoff's laugh rippled out.

"Aren't you the goods?" she cried. "My, I'll tell the world."

"Be quiet, Strickland!" said Ariadne. "The big gun's going to make his speech."

Strickland looked along the table to where a Cabinet Minister was fidgeting in his chair. Then he shook his head at Ariadne.

"Alas! the bigger the gun, the greater the bore."

Julian Ransome felt for a pencil and his diary.

"I should like to use that some time, if I may."

Strickland waved his hand.

"I say that sort of thing every other minute."

"Be quiet, Strickland!" said Ariadne.

And the speech of the evening was made. It was just afterwards, when the applause had died down and the guests were settling once more into their places, that the amazing thing occurred. Strickland was saying an enthusiastic word about the speech to the more or less Czecho-Slovakian *prima donna,* when he heard a very urgent warning hissed out behind his elbow, like this:

"Hist! Hist!"

For a moment he was inclined to believe that some

waiter of more than usual insolence was choosing this method of demanding a tip from him; and he took no notice.

But the call was repeated and with an insistence still more sibilant.

"Hist! Hist!"

It was now a call to attention, imperative as an order on parade. But there was alarm in it, too. The man behind his elbow was afraid.

Strickland turned round, carelessly. When others were anxious, it was wise to be indifferent. He saw a foreign waiter, small and sturdy and broad-shouldered like a Japanese, but with the face of a ferret, and even a ferret's red eyes. He was not looking at Strickland at all, it was not Strickland's attention which he had been trying to arrest. But as soon as Strickland turned, his face managed to achieve a smile or something as near to a smile as can be expected from a ferret.

"It is my comrade. I call him," the waiter said with a French accent. "I teach him to wait. But as yet he has not the practice. One, two, three times more and he will be a miracle."

Strickland's eyes took the line of the little waiter's. They led him to Leon Battchilena—he was a big and well-proportioned young man with a dark, vivacious face, rather thick of features, redeemed by a pair of black, clear, expressive eyes and a head which was growing prematurely bald. Battchilena was turned towards Ariadne. He was talking to her with an intense earnestness and in a low voice, as if he shared some secret with her which must be jealously guarded—or as if he were making love. A flame of anger suddenly blazed high in Strickland's breast and quite drove from his mind his momentary curiosity. He knew the worth of these public lovers—the men who could not discuss a triviality with a pretty woman unless they put enough fervour and secrecy into the argument to make all the company

present smile and nod and think "There's a case." Strickland felt a great sympathy at the moment with Julian Ransome, who certainly held sound views about Leon Battchilena.

But his attention was once more caught by the Frenchman behind him.

"Hist! Hist!"

Strickland now saw on the other side of Battchilena a black-sleeved arm and a hand which held a box of cigars. A waiter was offering it to Battchilena, but he held the box in so awkward and inattentive a fashion that the cigars were on the point of tumbling out in a cascade upon the table. It was undoubtedly this waiter whose notice the little ferret behind was failing to attract.

Strickland's eyes now followed the line of that outstretched arm with a certain amusement. Would the cigars slip out before this clumsy Ganymede waked to his duties? And what so engrossed him? His eyes mounted upwards to the broad shoulders and from the shoulders to the face, and then he fell back in his chair whilst a low cry broke from his lips.

Here! And in this menial service! Was there ever such a contrast? he asked himself. He whipped round in his chair.

"Who is that man?" he asked in a quiet and commanding voice. "Quick! Tell me!"

And he saw the little ferret's eyes open wide and stark, unutterable fear gather in the depths of them and shine out as from behind a glass.

"Tell me!" Strickland whispered.

The little man took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face.

"He is my friend, my comrade," he babbled. "One, two, three times more——" And his face changed. His terror was aggravated into a spasm of malignity. His lips were drawn back in a grin and his yellow teeth showed like the fangs of an animal.

"He nothing to do with you," he snarled viciously. "You take care! You leave my friend alone!"

Strickland smiled contemptuously at the threat. He turned slowly back. The whispered dialogue had taken no longer than a second or two to begin and end. The waiter was still standing over Battchilena; the cigar-box was still poised at its precarious angle. So for the second time Strickland saw the formidable man who had so disturbed the current of his life. Once in the very heart and mystery of a moonlit jungle. Now amidst the lights and music and laughter of a fashionable company at a public dinner in the midst of the London season.

And as he watched fear came in its turn to Strickland. The man here—no longer three thousand miles away—actually at hand! Was he here to strike, secretly, swiftly, with absolute accuracy and success, as he had already struck those thousands of miles away? Surely Strickland had been right on that first night when he had sat under the bright stars on the veranda of the dak-bungalow at Mogok. His premonition had been the one premonition out of a hundred which works out true.

For the cause of the waiter's inattention was evident. His eyes were fixed upon the card on the table in front of Battchilena. He was not the waiter who had served that part of the room during the dinner. He had come to this corner for the first time with the cigars. And he had now read Battchilena's name, saw Battchilena himself, would know him for ever afterwards, and was held rooted to the spot. He stood without a movement, a grim smile upon his lips, his eyes bright and very quiet, and his aquiline and furrowed face wearing not so much a look of triumph as a grandeur. He appeared to Strickland as one who, having suffered all the sufferings possible in the world, was now at last saying: "Have I found you, O my enemy?"

The ferret behind Strickland's chair no longer dared to hiss his warning, but he used his handkerchief to sig-

nal with, and now at last the stranger noticed it. He bent down to Battchilena.

"Cigars, sir?"

Battchilena, who was smoking a cigarette, waved him impatiently away, and the waiter carried the box back to a side table by the door. But that intimate conversation was interrupted. Ariadne looked up. Her eyes met Strickland's and greeted him. She nodded her head with a friendly lift of her eyebrows, and with a smile which set the dimples dancing in her cheeks she raised her glass to him.

"No," Strickland said to himself with a sudden fire. "If that man strikes again, the blow must not glance off to her;" and the look upon his face surprised and troubled Ariadne, so that her smile died away and her eyes grew serious with compassion.

An inspiration came to John Strickland—he thought it nothing less than that. If some one was to strike, let himself strike first—now—a blow which would warn rather than wound. He leaned forward towards Battchilena and spoke across Mr. Ricardo and Ariadne.

"Did you notice the waiter who offered you a cigar?"

"No."

"He is there—standing against the wall close to the door. The big man with the thick reddish hair."

Battchilena looked carelessly over the tables to the spot. The waiter was standing up very straight, gazing into the air in front of him. Even in the shabby graceless livery which he wore a grace was evident, and still more evident than his grace was his physical strength. He stood erect like a great column which it would need an earthquake to overthrow.

"He's not the sort of man to meet on a dark night," Battchilena observed negligently.

Strickland corrected him.

"Not the sort of man for *you* to meet," he said quietly.

Battchilena sat up in his chair. He stared at Strick-

land. A look of insolence appeared upon his face. Certainly there was no hint of alarm.

"Why me more than any one else?" he asked, with a note of challenge.

"Because he was very interested in you."

Battchilena looked again towards the door. He was puzzled, but no more than puzzled. He frowned in an effort of memory and shook his head.

"No, I have never seen the man before."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite!"

"Yet he was very interested in you," Strickland repeated. "For my part I have seen him before. In Burma."

And now the Spaniard's face did lose its air of negligence.

"In Burma? And he was watching me?" he whispered with a little catch of his breath, and he leaned forward. "But, Colonel Strickland, I have never been in Burma in my life."

"No?"

"No."

An unaccountable hush had fallen upon that little group of people at the end of the table. A jest had surely turned imperceptibly into some momentous incident, a bout with the foils into a duel with swords. The two men leaning forward towards each other, the one apparently challenging, the other parrying, had made their friends just spectators in an auditorium and held them silent and breathless in a queer suspense. All of them, that is to say except Mr. Ricardo, who by means of little ejaculations and restless movements evinced an intention once more to take the floor. But Madame Chrestoff, the Czecho-Slovakian *prima donna* from Illinois, shook a peremptory finger at him, and for the moment he subsided.

"I had better tell you how I came to see that man," said Strickland.

"If you please," replied Battchilena.

"It was in the jungle—close to Mogok."

The name of the little town clearly had no message for the Spaniard.

"Mogok, of course, means the ruby mines."

It might. Without doubt it did. But equally without doubt it meant nothing at all to Battchilena.

"That man over there came to Mogok in search of a native, whose name, I think, was Maung H'la," said Strickland; and thus to the third of Ariadne's party fear came at the Semiramis Hotel that night.

The blood drained out of Battchilena's face and left it green. His lips so shook that he could not control them, became so dry that the words he meant to speak would not issue from him. He spoke them at last. There was no pretence of ignorance or indifference any longer. He shot a secret glance towards the still figure against the wall as he asked his question.

"Did he find Maung H'la?" There was a look of anguish in his eyes.

"I can't answer you. I think he did. For Maung H'la was found two days later with his neck broken, in the jungle."

Battchilena shot back in his chair. He sat as though he had been turned to stone. Then, slowly and gropingly, whilst all watched him in suspense, his hands, trembling like the hands of a paralytic, travelled forward over the tablecloth. They touched the card on which his name was written, fumbled with it, dropped it and picked it up.

"Leon Battchilena."

Written in thick black ink on the white shiny strip of pasteboard the name stood out like relief work. Battchilena tore the card across once, and then a frenzy of destruction seized him. He tore it again and again and again, his long, thin fingers flickering like a machine, and little whimpering noises breaking from his mouth. Strick-

land watched him without a movement. Never had he seen a spectacle so degrading as this man's surrender to panic. It hurt him actually. It was the revelation of a flaw in the nature common to them all, a flaw which ought not to be, a flaw which vilified. But he never moved until the card lay shredded into tiny shining fragments on the tablecloth. Then he said remorselessly:

"But that's of no use, Señor Battchilena."

"Why?"

Strickland felt himself a brute. He was hitting with a cudgel a man without defence—as that other had hit in the moonlit jungle. All the more reason, therefore, to leave Battchilena no opportunity of cradling himself in a fool's paradise.

"Because that waiter read your name. He stood behind you with the cigar-box in his hand and you took no notice. You were so busy talking." Strickland was not in the mood to be generous at that moment. "He stood behind you for a full minute. His eyes were fixed upon your card——" And with a curious jerk Battchilena pitched forward, so that it seemed his face must strike the table. But he caught his head in his hands. Ransome poured out a glass of water from a water-bottle in front of him.

"He will faint," said Madame Chrestoff.

Battchilena replied with a shake of his head.

"No, no! I am dizzy, that's all. It's the heat."

He looked furtively behind him. In the corner of the room, upon his left hand, there was a closed door. He stole a secret glance towards the waiter who still stood against the wall, immobile as a statue, staring into space.

"It's the heat," he repeated. "I think I'll get into the fresh air," and with his body bent he whipped out of his chair. In a second he was gone.

Outside the little group, in so quiet an undertone and with such few gestures, except for the space of time during which the Spaniard was tearing up his card, had

this incident been conducted, no particular interest had been aroused. Madame Chrestoff was for making light of it.

"Yes, it's the heat. We shall see no more of Leon Battchilena to-night."

"On the contrary," returned Strickland, "we shall not see him here, but I think that we shall see him."

"I hope we shall," cried Ariadne gallantly. "Leon is a friend of mine."

Strickland threw up his hands in mock despair.

"My dear," he retorted, "it will take the whole Day of Judgment to sort out your friends, and I doubt if the work will be done then."

"Be quiet, Strickland," said Ariadne.

He was quiet and his quietude was Mr. Ricardo's opportunity. But for once in a way he had something to relate and something which Strickland, above all, was anxious to hear.

"I, too, have seen that waiter," he said with the air of a man who would solve this difficult mystery for them all in a second. "Years ago! Let me see now! Ten years ago I saw him."

"Where?" said Strickland in a flash.

"In France," began Mr. Ricardo; but before he could say another word the little Frenchman was at his elbow, obsequious but insistent.

"You take a liqueur, gentleman? Some fine champagne? Very good brandy. Yes? No? Then you take a cigar. I send my friend with the cigars to you. No? Please to say one word only, and I send to you my friend with the cigars."

Was there just the slightest touch of menace in the tone of that little ferret of a Frenchman. The words? You might take them how you pleased. But there was no doubt how Mr. Ricardo took them. His face shut like a box. A lid had been slammed down upon his experiences.

"No, no, it is a mistake," he exclaimed. "I see it now —a mere resemblance. No, I have not seen that man before."

And so to a fourth man fear had come at that dinner at the Semiramis Hotel.

Strickland leaned back in his chair, disappointed. He could not in any case, however, pursue his inquiries. For the stentorian voice rang out again, calling upon Mr. Julian Ransome, M.P., to propose the toast of "Your Chairman."

Ransome made a short speech and made his mark with it. When he sat down the applause was louder in volume and more generous in tone than any which had been heard that evening. Strickland, with many vigorous nods, conveyed his congratulations to Ariadne. With Lord Culalla's no less brief reply, the dinner broke up. But as they were leaving the banqueting-room Ransome drew Strickland aside.

"I can't go on with you," he said. "I must go back to the House. I have promised the Whips. There will be four or five Divisions after twelve. Will you look after Ariadne?"

"Of course," said Strickland. "Will you see her and Madame Chrestoff into my car? I'll be down in a moment."

Strickland lingered behind to speak to the *maître d'hôtel.* He slipped a five-pound note into his hand.

"There was a big waiter here to-night. He carried the cigars round. Can you tell me anything about him?"

The *maître d'hôtel* spread out his hands.

"But, monsieur, I know nothing about him, not even his name, not even his face. He is not upon our regular staff. Consider a little! We are in the middle of the season. We have three public dinners at the Semiramis Hotel every night. So we go to an agency for waiters. See, I give you the address. It is in Shaftesbury Avenue. We ring up the agency in the morning and we say, 'We

want so many waiters for to-night, and see that their hands are clean and that they are not drunk!'" He gazed round the empty room, in which a few men of the permanent staff were already clearing the tables. "See, they are all gone. I cannot help you. But at the address I give you they will know."

Strickland fetched his hat and coat and ran down the stairs to the entrance. Ariadne and Madame Chrestoff were already seated in his car. He gave the address of the club to the chauffeur and took his place opposite to them. For a few moments they drove in silence through the street. Then Ariadne leaned forward.

"John, I think you were a brute to-night to my friend Leon," she said reproachfully.

"I don't think so," he replied gently. "Battchilena was of your party. Therefore he was safe from me. What I did I think I had to do. I think, too, that you'll agree with me before this night's out."

For of one thing he was certain—Battchilena must at once take counsel with Corinne.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: *Corinne*

THE lights in the side-lamps upon the walls and in the great crystal chandelier overhead waned and went out, and with their extinction the clamour of voices died away. Then from an upper gallery a beam, mellow and warm and thick as a column, struck down into the dark cavern of the room and lit up a small square arena enclosed by the supper-tables, turning it into a box of gold. A single chord, violent and imperative like a summons to surrender, burst from the orchestra, and in that glowing space now stood Corinne and her dancing partner.

"Well?" said Ariadne, with a smile of pride to John Strickland. They were sitting in the darkness at a table by the door.

"Yes," he answered. "She is lovely."

Corinne stood slenderly erect in her shining wisp of frock, her small face uplifted like a flower, her feet together, her slim arms outstretched, as though she hung upon a cross. She was a couple of years older than Ariadne, and in the very perfection of her delicate beauty; her fair head shingled and sleek, her fine nose just a trifle uplifted, her mouth made for kisses. In that radiant light her throat and shoulders were like snow at the rising of the sun and gleamed with the sheen of satin. She was tall and long-limbed, with ankles and feet and hands seemingly as fragile as glass. For her dress she wore an orange-coloured frock of shining tissue, with a narrow girdle of silver below her waist. It outlined her small, firm breasts, and fell in straight lines to the knees, where it was fringed with a double row of ostrich feathers. Her slim legs and feet were sheathed in white stockings

and satin slippers, on the toes of which diamond buckles sparkled and danced. Otherwise she wore no jewels, not a ring, not a bracelet, not a pendant. As she stood there in that flood of radiance, *soignée,* polished from head to foot, joyous, at her ease, she seemed to combine the luxury of an orchid with the health of a rose.

"My!" exclaimed young Madame Chrestoff in a low voice of admiration. "She's just a lovely gleaming plaything in a golden box."

"Yes," Strickland replied dryly. "It is quite difficult to believe that it is she who plays and we who do the dancing."

"Be quiet, Strickland!" said Ariadne.

With one liquid movement, Corinne sank into a curtsy and rose again erect. Then the orchestra struck into a tango, and with her partner she began to dance, pacing delicately, the slippers pointed, the insteps arched, the body lithe so that each movement and gesture melted into the next; as though she rippled rather than danced. The time quickened, the measure of the music changed. Now Corinne walked sedately in a one-step, now she spun like a Bacchante crowned with grapes in a divine abandonment of passion—round and round till it seemed she must be flung against the tables to fall bruised and broken upon the floor. But she did not fall. In a moment she was waltzing with her partner languorously, swooning in his arms, her fair head drooped, her eyes full of sleep between half-closed lids. With a laugh she escaped from him, then returned to him, giving all and keeping all.

Madame Chrestoff clapped her hands.

"That Jane may kick my Sealyham puppy dawg with her little satin slippers if she wants to," she whispered fervently; and admiration found thus at last its supreme expression.

But there were others in that club, of course. It is the artist, looking back upon that drudgery which is the prelude to achievement, who most generously appreciates

perfect execution in one of beauty's other forms. So while Madame Chrestoff applauded, others, and especially those who had never attempted anything more difficult than a criticism, were at pains to attenuate Corinne's success. Comments reached the party at the table by the door.

"My dear, it's wonderful what Gran has done for her! A couple of years ago she was a stick."

"Yes, wasn't she? Pretty, of course, but as stiff as a jointed doll. Oh, Gran has taught her everything."

Gran, certainly, though he appeared to efface himself, was always at her shoulder. He set the step, he caught and supported her, he lifted her above his head and whirled her in flashing circles as though she was of no more weight than one of the ostrich feathers at the hem of her dress. No doubt he had taught her everything, but the best of masters must have the best of pupils if supreme success is to be achieved; and the glory of the one is the glory of the other. As if to confound the detractors, Gran now stepped aside in a corner of the arena and left Corinne to dance alone.

It was whilst she was dancing alone that Strickland found the final secret of her triumph. Lovely she was—yes! Graceful she was—yes! Exquisite and decorous—yes. But so were others. What she had—the especial, particular, necessary quality required to set her where she was—was an amazing reserve, somehow retained, somehow manifest, even when she whirled like a dervish.

"That's it, Ariadne, I think," he said in a low voice as he watched. "I mean she belongs to herself all the time. She will curtsy to you, smile at you, dance for you, make you a present of her beauty and her grace, but she is not yours—no, not for a moment—and you know it. She is her own."

Ariadne looked away towards Corinne with thoughtful eyes. Then she looked again at Strickland.

"What then of Leon?" she asked.

Strickland had forgotten Battchilena altogether during the last half-hour. He considered his theory from that new angle.

"Battchilena," he said, "is probably an incident."

Ariadne laughed, and the next moment the room was ringing with applause. Corinne had finished her performance. She stood quite still in the golden light, as fresh and unruffled, with her face and white shoulders as cool, her breath as steady, as before she had begun to dance at all. The lovely gleaming plaything of Madame Chrestoff's description, with a stamp of race. We call it race for want of a better name. But Jenny, the postman's daughter, has it sometimes, visible to the very tips of her fingers, whilst my Lady in the Chase up on the hill, as often as not, deplores her clumsy knees and thick articulations before her mirror, and would give half her ancestry for a share of it. From whatever gutter Corinne sprang, she had all of Jenny's and my Lady's absent share into the bargain. With a bow to her partner, and a smile of thanks for her audience, she curtsied once more. The lights went up again; the orchestra rushed into a fox-trot, the company rushed into the area and then jumped and jostled, and jigged and bumped, like a crowd of mixed sea-bathers at Margate.

Through that crowd Corinne made her slow way to Ariadne's table. She dropped into a chair, was introduced to Madame Chrestoff and Strickland, and took a glass of champagne. The due and very sincere compliments were paid; and before they were done with, Battchilena was amongst them. But a different Battchilena. His face was mottled and flushed, his gait unsteady. As Ariadne made room for him on the bench against the wall, he seized the champagne bottle by the neck and filled a glass to the brim. In a low voice he began to talk very quickly with a slobbering mouth. He talked to Corinne, and Corinne drew Ariadne into their conversation.

Strickland looked across the table at Madame Chrestoff.

"We are rather out of it for the moment," he said, and he looked towards the enclosure. "Shall we plunge in?"

The *prima donna* was on her legs before he had finished his question.

"Colonel Strickland, my feet have been aching for you to ask me that question."

They left the three people engrossed in their debate and, watching for their opportunity, insinuated themselves into the mêlée.

"It's fierce work," said Madame Chrestoff, her face radiant, "but I adore it."

"Yes. It must be so different from the amusements of your native city, Prague," said Strickland, as he swung her clear of the tables and an ice-bucket.

Madame Chrestoff gurgled.

"The only thing to say to you, sir, is the only thing Ariadne ever says to you. 'Be quiet, Strickland.'"

"Mamie, you can't say it on so short an acquaintance."

She gave her history whilst they danced. A meagre purse, a heart full of ambition, some years of study at Milan and Rome, a foreign name as the absolute *sine qua non,* and at last the début at Monte Carlo which flung open for her the opera houses of the world.

"Success when you're young's a peach," said Strickland. "When you're old it's a medlar."

The *prima donna* dropped her voice.

"Talking of success," she nodded her head towards their table by the door, "is there real trouble over there?"

"Yes."

"Danger, even?"

"Yes."

"Can I do anything?"

Strickland burst out roughly.

"My God, no!"

"I wish I could," said the singer wistfully. "That girl! Lovely; and the loveliness wasn't got without work. Lots

of it. Dull, tiresome. The same stupid thing over and over again until it's right. And then it's only right for to-day. It's got all to be done again in the morning. Say, you are sure I can't do anything?"

"Quite."

The music stopped. They walked back to their table. As they reached it, Ariadne put out a hand and caught him by the sleeve.

"John Strickland, where did you learn to dance like that?"

So she had been watching him, even whilst she talked. His heart jumped up into his throat with a flutter and his brains jumped out of the window. In his exultation he uttered the first idiocy which came into his head.

"All amongst the tigers in the jungle," he cried.

Battchilena started back with a sort of yelp, whilst Ariadne threw up her hands in despair. But presently in spite of her efforts, she began quietly to laugh.

"My dear," she said sympathetically, "this isn't your night out, is it? If there's a *gaffe* which you can possibly make, you make it at once, don't you? Now be quiet!"

She turned back and resumed her conference. Strickland on this occasion needed no injunction to keep him quiet. For when his eyes fell upon Corinne he was shocked. Battchilena had told his story of the Semiramis dinner by now, and no doubt all the secret history of it, only dimly surmised by Strickland. And the story had worked havoc with Corinne's delicate beauty. Her face was pinched and so white beneath her rouge that she looked like a painted doll, her eyes were haggard with terror, even her fair hair seemed to have lost its lustre. The glamour was gone from her. She sat in the dainty accoutrements of Corinne the dancer, a poor soul shivering in dismay.

Strickland was moved to great pity. There was a gruesome two-sided picture painted by some forgotten Italian in the era of the Renaissance which he had once seen

in a country house. It swung upon a hinge against the wall, and showed you a girl in the pride of her beauty, decked out in fine clothes and jewels. But swing the picture round, and there was that which in a few years she must come to. Her jewels still sparkled and her hand-mirror remained unbroken to mock, but the face was a hideous skull with a blackened gaping mouth and one dead glaucous eye clinging in its socket like the eye of a fish! Strickland was reminded of that picture now as he gazed upon Corinne, and by some freak of his imagination, behind her the air seemed to thicken and grow solid and shape itself darkly into a giant figure. Behind her, towering over her, stood the spectral avenger with the club, even as in the flesh he had towered over Battchilena. But now Ariadne's head was bent close to Corinne's. The blow which felled one of them must smite also the other; and though Strickland knew that vision to be no more than a mirror reflecting his fears, he could hardly repress a cry.

Some words, however, were spoken more loudly which recalled him to his senses.

"Culalla?" Battchilena suggested.

Corinne shook her head.

"He never comes near me. He is here now, across the room, a stranger."

Ariadne shrugged her shoulders.

"A caprice," she said. "It will pass."

But Corinne would not have it.

"More than a caprice. Culalla is after all in the middle of his career. He doesn't want—trouble. He doesn't want to miss the boat. He dropped me at once after that evening at Greymark——" She looked round, fearing that she had been overheard, and resumed in a lower voice, "I don't believe that he has spoken two sentences to me since."

Culalla! So he was concerned too, and in just the same way, it seemed, as Ariadne! Through friendship with

Corinne. But he had had the wisdom to lop that friendship off, without a second's delay. Strickland glanced across the room to where he sat at his favourite table surrounded by his bodyguard. If ever Strickland had nursed a doubt that Ariadne, with her impetuous loyalty, needed a sentinel at her door, the doubt was gone now."

Ariadne leaned forward and touched his sleeve.

"Will you dance with me?"

"Like a feather."

"Perhaps," said she.

But as soon as they had moved away to the dancing space the amusement died out of her face.

"I want to talk to you, John."

"In a second."

For the first time in two years he held Ariadne in his arms and the moment was too wondrous to be spoilt by any debate. His blood throbbed in his veins and clamoured at his ears. He could feel the beat of her heart against his breast. Her lips were within such easy reach of his, her hand rested on his shoulder, they moved as one.

"John, you are asleep," she cried indignantly.

"I am very wide awake, my dear," he whispered, "but in a new and wonderful world. However, I am coming back. Here I am. Fire away!"

"Corinne's scared out of her wits."

"I know."

"Do you know why, too?"

"I can only guess. It's because the man who followed and killed Maung H'la may now be following her."

Ariadne nodded her head.

"I see. You were warning Battchilena at the Semiramis?"

"Yes."

"Will you do more than warn?"

"Of course. What else am I on earth for?"

She gave his arm a little squeeze.

"But it's Corinne, not me, that you must help."

So he hoped with all his soul and without one small spark of faith. But he would not admit it.

"Isn't Corinne your friend?" he asked, as though that were answer enough.

Ariadne threw off the load of her anxiety. She drew a long breath of relief and by it Strickland was thanked beyond all measure of thanks due.

The music stopped at that moment.

"Wait!" said Ariadne. "The orchestra will go on again. I have something more to say to you."

There was a clapping of hands and the inevitable encore was conceded. The floor was less crowded now. It was easier to move without jostling one's neighbours or being jostled by them. But though movement was easier, Ariadne found speech more difficult.

"You see," she faltered, "you must help me. For Leon is of no use."

"He'll run to ground," replied Strickland.

"I think he will," Ariadne agreed. "And besides——"

She was at a loss. Honesty was native to her. She was absolutely clear that these words must get themselves spoken. Yet how was she to speak them without wounding the friend who served her friend for her? Strickland solved her dilemma by speaking them himself.

"Besides, Julian Ransome must be kept outside the whole of this entanglement. Heaven knows what will come of it! But whatever comes it can only do him harm."

This is what she had in mind. But when she heard it said, she stopped and lowered her head, as if charging her friend with the service which she might with more reason have claimed from her lover, brought with it some reproach and shame.

"Thank you, John," she said in a small voice.

Had she looked up at that moment she would have

seen upon her friend's face such a strange light, such a passion of gladness as would have startled her. The dim menace which had so disturbed his nights and filled his days with fear had taken on in this last minute a new complexion. Afraid of it? He welcomed it! There was a secret now which he shared with her and from which young Ransome was excluded, help to be given by him, peril to be averted by him, whilst Ransome walked apart.

But very quickly shame touched Strickland as a moment ago it had touched Ariadne. He sought to make amends. There were a few words of praise which all that evening he had known would give her great pleasure, yet which he had refrained from uttering. He repaired this omission now.

"Listen, Ariadne," he said earnestly as she prepared to resume the dance. "I heard Ransome speak to-night. I'll be frank with you. I was surprised. There was a ring of authority in his voice for which I wasn't prepared. And yet a modesty went with it. What he had to say, too, was just what was wanted, and it was said in just the right phrases. I seemed to see a different man from the one I knew, bigger altogether. I ought not to have been surprised. For I have seen the same thing so often in my own calling—men who outside their work were no more than other men, and yet in their work were suddenly transfigured, became in an instant men who led and were followed with confidence."

For a little while Ariadne remained with her eyes bent upon the ground. Then she flung back her head. "Come, Strickland, what are you thinking about? Let us dance!" she cried. But she had not taken more than half a dozen steps before she added in a low and very tender voice:

"My dear, if I didn't love Julian, I should adore you."

The dance ended. The company in the room had thinned; half of the supper tables were now unoccupied. Leon Battchilena had already disappeared; Madame

Chrestoff had risen and was arranging her cloak about her shoulders. Ariadne detained Strickland as they approached her table.

"You have your car here?"

"Yes," said he.

"You will go with Madame Chrestoff to the entrance and see her into her car. Then you will call up yours; and whilst you are doing that, you will notice, won't you, whether any one is watching in the street?"

There was no need for her to define whom she meant by "any one."

"Meanwhile we shall wait in the corridor. Of course, there may be nothing in Corinne's fears at all. We may laugh at them to-morrow."

CHAPTER TWELVE: *Corinne's Doll's House*

STRICKLAND watched the red tail-light of Madame Chrestoff's car dwindle rapidly. Some ten or fifteen yards away a line of other cars waited against the kerb. But the pavement in front of the entrance to the Club was clear, and no one was loitering across the road. The one likely hiding-place was the line of motor-cars with their confusing lamps and their close proximity. Strickland walked slowly along the line. His big waiter was not lurking anywhere amongst them. He returned down the line again until he reached his own car.

"Draw up to the entrance quietly and at once," he said in a low voice, and only when the car was in position there, and out of earshot of the remaining chauffeurs, he gave his instructions.

"Drive off as quickly as you can, as soon as the door is shut. Cross Bond Street, and the top end of Berkeley Square, continue along Mount Street, and turn to the right up South Audley Street. But slow down as soon as you have turned into South Audley Street, and be ready to act at once on any order."

Then Strickland turned to the commissionaire.

"Have the door of the car open when we come out."

"Very well, sir."

The entrance to the Club was at the end of a roofed passage. But as he re-entered the passage, he saw the two girls in their cloaks huddled against the wall in the very mouth of it. He made a sign to the commissionaire, who stood with the door already open and the carriage-wrap across his arm. The two girls flashed across the pavement like a trail of glittering sparks and leaped into the

car. Strickland followed upon their heels. He snatched the wrap from the commissionaire and dropped a tip into his palm. The door closed with a snap and on the instant the car glided smoothly away.

Ariadne laughed out loud with a throb of joyous excitement in her throat.

"We're off," she cried with the high spirit of an explorer setting forth upon some great adventure. Corinne, on the contrary, huddled in the corner of the car, put out an imploring hand.

"Turn out the lights, will you?" she pleaded in an extremity of fear. "Oh, please! We are as visible as if we were in a glass case."

Strickland leaned forward to the little switch by Corinne's elbow.

"I am sorry. I should have thought of that," he said, and the next moment the interior of the car was in darkness.

"Thank you," said Corinne with a gasp of relief as she threw open her cloak.

The car ran noiselessly along Bruton Street and across Berkeley Square. At times the light of a street lamp sparkled for a moment on the gold embroidery of Ariadne's dress, or glimmered on the white throat and bosom of Corinne. At the corner of Mount Street Corinne asked suddenly:

"Are we being followed?"

Strickland, from his chair facing them, looked out through the small glass panel in the back of the limousine.

"No."

"Not even by a bicycle? . . . Bicycles are used."

Strickland concealed a smile. Bicycles were certainly used by the touts of the private inquiry agents whose sordid business it was to obtain particulars as to where and with whom this wife or that husband disposed of her or his evenings. He was not surprised that Corinne should be aware of the practice.

"No bicycle is following us."

At the corner of South Audley Street the car turned northwards and its speed was reduced.

"Ariadne has given me your address. But we shall pass your house and go as far as Grosvenor Square," he explained. "Then if we see no one—suspicious—we shall drive round the garden in the middle of the square and return."

Corinne raised her hand to her heart.

"Then you, too, are sure——" she began.

He waited for her to be more explicit, but she said no more. She wanted help, but it must be by a hand stretched out of the dark and into the dark.

"I am not sure," he replied. "I am only taking precautions. Let me watch!"

His eyes roved from side to side as the car moved forward. He saw nothing more alarming than a man in evening dress with his overcoat across his arm, a policeman, and a group of young people getting into cars and cabs in front of a lighted house from which music streamed.

"It's all right," he said.

The car swung round the square and returned. On its eastern side the street is broken by a broad blind alley. On one side of this alley stretches a long and low-roofed chapel, on the other a great shop with its warehouse. At the bottom is a big gate behind which stretches a public garden, and in the corner, by the side of this gate, stands a small, square, flat house like a doll's house. It is painted white, and the door and the windows are picked out in black, and with the long empty chapel upon one side, and the empty warehouse on the other, and the empty locked garden behind, it was, at this hour of the morning, as lonely as a farm in the country. Strickland's car swept into this blind alley and stopped as near as it could to the small black door. But the great length of its body prevented it from drawing up.

"Give me your latch-key!" he said to Corinne.

Corinne took it from her hand-bag and thrust it into his hand.

"The switch in the hall is on the left-hand side by the door," she said.

Strickland shook his head.

"I shan't turn the light on until you are all in the house and the door closed."

Ariadne leaned forward.

"Then you did see——" she began.

"No one," Strickland interrupted her. "But the door's narrow. We can only enter one at a time. If I switch the light on, each one in turn will be outlined black against it like one of those old daguerreotypes. I shall leave the door of the car open. As soon as the door of the house is open, too, come as quickly as you can, one behind the other."

The two girls watched him descend, without haste and yet with remarkable speed. With the same neat celerity he crossed to the door, found the tiny keyhole, into which that thin Yale key fitted, and noiselessly opened it. For a moment he stared into the dark, narrow passage—immobile, listening. Ariadne's eyes darted this way and that about the alley. It was curious how fear clutched suddenly at her heart and took her breath away as she watched Strickland standing upon the one shallow step, a target for the poorest of marksmen, whether hidden within the house or outside in the shadows of the alley; and how deep the relief which made her toss back her head with a low laugh, when he whispered, "Now," and stepped within the door.

"Run, Corinne!" she urged. "I'll follow you."

Corinne needed no urging. She had nine or ten yards to traverse, and Strickland had a fancy that light itself could not have travelled more swiftly than Corinne. As soon as Ariadne had followed, he closed the door, but so smoothly that not the slightest click of the latch was

heard, not the tiniest jar felt. For a few moments they stood together holding their breath, listening, with every sense alert, and hearing the darkness throb about them like the beat of their own hearts. Strickland felt Ariadne's hand slip in under his elbow and tighten upon his arm.

"Turn on the light, Corinne," he said in a composed and quiet voice, and the crystal pendant shone bright above their heads. He gave back to her her latch-key.

"Thank you," she said, and she moved forward to a door upon the left hand. It was a narrow passage, with the walls distempered in white and the door which Corinne approached painted black. Strickland turned back to Ariadne.

"You would," he said, with a smile of appreciation.

"Do what?" she asked.

"Follow last of all, masking her, so that if there should be any danger, it must be you whom it would take."

Ariadne wrinkled her nose at him.

"Be quiet, Strickland," she said, and then with a change of voice, "Look!"

Corinne had turned the handle of that left-hand door and had pushed it till it stood just a trifle ajar. She was hesitating now upon the threshold and threw a wavering glance back towards her companions.

"The light-switch is across the room by the fire-place," she faltered.

"I'll turn it on," said Strickland.

He drew Corinne away and opened the door wide, pressing it back against the wall of the room, lest any one should be hiding there. Then he crossed to the fire-place and turned on the light. The room ran the depth of the house, a general living-room, with a smallish oval mahogany dining-table in the back part. Corinne picked up a match-box from the mantelshelf and knelt in front of the hearth.

"I am cold," she said, with a shiver.

She struck a match and lit the fire and sat back upon

her heels watching the flames leap up. But she was listening, too, with her every fibre tense.

"Shall I go over the house with you?" Strickland asked.

Corinne sprang up gratefully.

"Oh, thank you!"

She turned to Ariadne. "Do you mind? You will be safe here."

But Strickland was not so lightly satisfied. For all that he knew, there might be danger in that house to-night for all of them.

"No," he said. "We'll keep together."

They descended into the basement, the two girls following upon Strickland's heels, whilst Corinne directed him to the various switches for the electric light. Strickland explored every cranny, even to the cellar across the area. Then, locking and bolting the door, he returned at the head of the tiny procession to the level of the street.

"There are two floors above," he said.

Corinne explained the geography of the doll's house.

"Yes. On the top floor my maid and the cook sleep. Below them are my bedroom, bath-room, and a little drawing-room."

"Let us have a look at them," said Strickland, and very quietly he led the way upstairs.

Corinne's bedroom was stretched across the front of the house. It was hung with pale blue silk, embroidered with gold and, with its head to the side of the house, stood a broad, low gold bed of ancient Italian make, mounted upon a dais. A coverlet of blue silk brocaded with gold and hung with heavy golden tassels lay upon it. A dressing-table of satinwood stood across the corner of the room by the windows, so gay with dainty implements of steel and ivory and tortoiseshell, with handles of gold and amber and jade; so loaded with little pots of rouge and big bowls of powder, with lipsticks and hare's-feet, and brushes and combs; so encumbered with essences of

every kind of perfume, and every kind of colour, from the deep indigo of chypre to the golden-brown of amber, treasured in adorable bottles of fantastic shapes; that surely the very Goddess of Beauty herself must slip down from the skies whilst Corinne slept, and tire and prink herself before that mirror. A thick blue carpet covered the floor; an exquisite praying-rug from Turkestan was spread before the dressing-table; another, of white angora, stood beside the dais.

Whilst they were still standing in the doorway of this room Strickland asked Corinne to mount the final flight of stairs, and call her maid and her cook, to make sure that they occupied their rooms.

"You will be within view of us," he said.

Corinne ascended and roused her servants. Each of them answered in turn, sleepily, and after an interval. During that interval Ariadne turned back into the bedroom.

"It's lovely, John, isn't it?" she said in an enthusiastic undertone.

"Yes," John agreed dryly. "Elizabeth Clutter must have spent a small fortune on this room."

Ariadne jumped. Nothing was less expected by her than this retort.

"John," she whispered indignantly.

John for once remained unawed by her indignation. He continued calmly, never raising his voice sufficiently for Corinne, talking with her servants on the staircase above, to hear him:

"And if Elizabeth Clutter's money had to be restored in a hurry, all these pretty amenities would fetch at the most a fifth of what they cost."

Ariadne looked at him quickly. He had promised to help, and, without a doubt, would help to the last ounce of his blood. But there was a quiet note in his voice which warned her that he did not mean to help with a bandage over his eyes. Certainly he would have to

know all that they knew. Already, indeed—and she broke off in her reflections to ask herself how much already he did know. She heard Corinne turn upon the stairs behind her.

"Don't ask any questions to-night!" she pleaded. "Corinne's at the end of her wits with terror. There may be no reason for it. We shall known to-morrow, if you'll do what she asks. Oh, a tiny thing! Then, if there is reason, she shall tell you all that we have to tell you. I promise."

John Strickland accepted the compact at once. He had, indeed, hardly time for another word before Corinne rejoined them. They examined the bath-room behind the bedroom and the little drawing-room overlooking the gardens at the back of that. There was no intruder in the house that night; and they returned to the room on the level of the street. There the fire was now blazing cheerfully. Corinne was, so far as this night was concerned, reassured, and it was not within her nature to look very far ahead. She lit a cigarette, poured out a whisky and soda apiece, and said, with an attempt at gaiety as she dropped into a chair beside the fire:

"Now, let us hold a council of war."

Strickland drank some of his whisky and soda.

"No," he returned quietly. "The council of war can wait until to-morrow. To-night I take my instructions."

Indeed, that was just all that Corinne intended. Ariadne's friend was to take his instructions, although he was to be flattered by the illusion that his advice would be of enormous value. She was accustomed to a tribe of young men who bustled about for her on unimportant errands without asking undesirable questions. She had nursed a conviction that Ariadne's friend would fall into the same category; and a sullen look upon her face showed her disappointment.

Ariadne smiled.

"My dear, all the men who are of any use to us are

very, very troublesome, aggravating people," she said. "We have got to put up with that. Shall I tell him the little thing we want him to do?"

"Please," said Corinne sulkily.

Ariadne turned to Strickland.

"We want you to find out to-morrow morning that dreadful man who dined in the midst of us at the Semiramis."

Strickland nodded.

"Mr. Ricardo."

"Yes. We want you to get from him precisely when and where he saw that big waiter ten years ago. In a word, you must make him tell you what he was on the point of telling us all when the toast-master interrupted him by calling upon Julian."

Strickland glanced swiftly at Ariadne and as swiftly away again.

It was the venomous little Frenchman, not the toast-master at all, who had frozen upon Mr. Ricardo's tongue the story he was fluttering to tell. Ariadne had not noticed that. But there was nothing to be gained by adding to-night one new item of perplexity and fear to the burden they already had to carry. It would be time enough to-morrow to consider at what point the little Frenchman fitted into the puzzle.

"I'll try to make him tell me," Strickland answered, and, at the admission that he might not succeed, Corinne clapped her hands together in a passion of entreaty.

"But you must succeed, you must!" she cried. "You see, that man, our enemy—he's in the dark, hidden away, moving at his pleasure. We are out in the daylight—Leon and I. We stand in full view, like people tied hand and foot to stakes and blindfolded—people to be executed, waiting helplessly to be executed"—and she wrung her hands together, whilst a wild light of terror glittered in her eyes.

"I'll do my very best for you, Corinne," he said gravely.

"We had better meet somewhere after I have seen this man."

"Will you and Ariadne lunch here?" Corinne suggested, and Strickland shook his head and cried "No!" with a fervour which he instantly regretted.

He was possessed suddenly by an overpowering reluctance to eat bread and salt in that house which had belonged to Elizabeth Clutter, with Corinne for his hostess, beautiful as she was, amusing, no doubt, as she could be. Antediluvian, to be sure! But that outburst of Corinne's, as of a woman in a panic, the working hands, the tortured look upon her face, the vision of herself bound to a stake—all had, to Strickland's thinking, some uncomfortable semblance to a confession of guilt. There flashed through his mind a suggestion which had been made to him by Angus Trevor in the editorial office of *The Flame*, forgotten until this moment.

"You won't lunch here?"

Corinne was looking at him with dismay. Happily he had a sound excuse ready to his hand.

"If we have an enemy, let us not be in a hurry to tell him we are aware of it," he argued. "If he's in the dark, we'll take to the shadows, too. That's wisdom, isn't it? Let me think for a moment!" He gazed for a little while into the fire.

"This is the way. Each of you, at a quarter-past twelve, must pick up a taxi in the street, and not the first taxi that offers—and each one separately. You will drive across Putney Bridge, and there I'll be waiting for you in a car. We'll lunch in the country, and as we lunch I'll make my report. Is that agreed?"

Both Ariadne and Corinne said "Yes," and Strickland rose at once to his feet.

"It is late."

But Corinne moved more quickly to the door than he did. Terror again possessed her. She barred the way with arms outstretched, and one moment she commanded,

and the next she pleaded, and her voice ran, wavering, up and down the scale of fear.

"Don't leave me yet! You can't! If you do, I shall crouch here till morning."

Strickland stepped to the window, tore the heavy curtains aside and raised the blind. The morning had come. A pure, clear light, without colour or radiance, welled into the room and made the lustres garish. Strickland threw up the sash, and such bustling melodies of blackbird and thrush crowded in through the open window, and rose to the ceiling and beat upon the walls, as made Ariadne fancy that the birds must be aware they had only an hour or so before the horns would begin to hoot and the roar of traffic to drown all their music.

Corinne herself threw back her head and drew a long breath of relief.

"Yes," she said, a smile at last softening her face. "I have no right to keep you. It was kind of you both to have stayed with me so long."

She took up her cloak, whilst Strickland closed the window again.

"You shall go upstairs," he said. "We will wait until you have locked your door."

They heard her turn the key and let themselves out of the house. Ariadne hitched her cloak about her shoulders and throat with a shiver of cold, as she got into the car. But the car had hardly passed the end of the street before a shaft of sunlight suddenly struck down between the houses and the pavement shone like gold. Ariadne, who had not spoken a word since they had left Corinne's house, now uttered a little cry of longing.

"Oh, I should love——" she cried, and stopped dead with a rueful look in her eyes.

"What?" Strickland asked eagerly.

"To go straight on until we reached the sea," she admitted.

Strickland reached out his hand took the speaking tube from its clip. But she laid her hand upon his arm.

"It won't do, my dear."

"Two hours, Ariadne! Less, indeed, with the roads clear!"

"Yes, but two hours back also—and an hour there. I should be letting myself into my house at nine o'clock in the morning in gold shoes and an evening dress, whilst you, with a white tie around your throat, bade me good morning on the steps. My last little shred of character would be ripped into tatters."

She sat ruefully contemplating a calm sapphire sea rippling on a yellow beach in the gold and the stillness of a June morning. She stamped upon the floor of the car.

"Oh, what a crashing bore!" she cried with a full heart.

"He is," said Strickland; and Ariadne laughed with a lively appreciation of his sally. It was apt enough, as she was well aware.

A few months ago she would not have hesitated for a moment. In two hours' time, gold shoes and ermine wrap and all, she would have been sitting on a beach, throwing pebbles into the water, or raiding a bathing-machine for a swim in the sea. Now——? She shrugged her shoulders.

"No. I'll go home," she said.

But when the car was stopped at the door, still she did not move. She sat looking straight in front of her, with a face thoughtful and grave. What dreams were stirring behind her quiet eyes Strickland had no guide to tell him, but as he watched her, his heart began to beat with an unexpected throb in the stupidest fashion.

She dropped her hand upon his wrist with the lightest caress.

"Thank you, Strickland," she said, and in a second she was on the steps of her house with her latch-key in her hand; she turned, wrinkled her nose in a familiar grimace and kissed her hand to him. There was almost a studied

carelessness in her manner, meant to reduce to its lowest terms a moment with a possibility of emotion. But with the door open, she stopped again for an appreciable time, but without turning her head. Then she shrugged her shoulders once more, stepped in over the threshold and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: *The Amateur of the Horrible*

THERE was another personage concerned in this story who sat up late that night. Upon reaching his home in Grosvenor Square, Mr. Ricardo went into his library and took down from a bookshelf a volume of folio size, bound in brown cloth. There was a long row of such volumes, and on the back of each the date of a year was printed in gold letters, but no other title. The particular volume which Mr. Ricardo laid upon his writing-table bore a date just a decade old. He drew up his chair and opened the book. It was filled with newspaper cuttings pasted on to the white leaves, and like everything else in Mr. Ricardo's household, procedure, hours and way of life generally, most methodically arranged in order of time, with the names of the journals from which they had been cut, engrossed above each in an ornamental handwriting.

"Let me see! It was in March. Yes, the whole of the second week was occupied. And at Grenoble."

Mr. Ricardo turned over the leaves and lighted quickly on the cheap paper and ignoble print of a French provincial newspaper.

"*Le Courier de Grenoble.* Yes," he said.

There the whole grim story was set out from the first guarded article, entitled "Une Affaire Mysterieuse," to the last dreadful scene in the Assize Court.

Like Corinne, Mr. Ricardo set a match to his fire, for a chill of apprehension was upon him too, creeping into his old bones and clutching at his heart. But the flames were soon dancing upon the walls and imparting to the

room a cheerful warmth; and in a more comfortable mood, he sat down to refresh his memories.

The story began in Paris with a dinner party of five men, which took place at the Restaurant of La Rue during the first week of the preceding October. A Greek, named Andreas Eleutheros, who owned a small string of third-rate race-horses, and a rather spotted reputation besides, was the host, and the principal guest was a young Englishman, Archie Clutter, who was blessed with a rich wife and cursed with an ungoverned temper. The Greek's finances were, at this date, undoubtedly shaky, and no one who followed the course of the events could help suspecting that the dinner had been arranged in order to restore them. Certainly, before they separated, the five men had agreed to meet at Grenoble on a date early in November, and go up to a shooting-box which Eleutheros rented in the Dauphiné Alps, for a few days' sport.

Amidst the snows of those high mountains the second phase of the tragedy was enacted. The five men arrived at the shooting-box late in the afternoon, dined early, and after a little conversation upon the most harmless topics, went early to bed, since they were to start upon their expedition before daybreak. The whole of that first evening, in a word, was so much camouflage. The expedition for the next day also had been mapped out in detail. It was intended to take place. There was to be no opportunity given for the knowing to hint that the party was arranged less to shoot chamois than to shear a sheep.

During the night, however, the weather conspired with Mr. Eleutheros. The early start by lantern light was out of the question, and when the morning broke, the snow was falling as it can fall in those high regions—a white, thick, fleecy shawl against a background of impenetrable black. Thus the little game which was meant to be played at the earliest that night, and probably not until to-morrow, did actually begin at eleven o'clock on the first morning. The snow continued to fall for thirty-six hours with-

out any intermission. So did the cards almost. There were certain fragments of time during which meals were gobbled. But no one retired to bed; and in accordance with the usual procedure of such affairs, Archie Clutter won a handsome sum of money—or, to speak more exactly, a handsome quantity of counters—at the beginning of the engagement, and then lost as steadily as the snow fell. At eleven o'clock on the second night Archie Clutter leaped to his feet with a roar of fury, flung the card-table aside as though it were no heavier than a paper-weight, and drove his fist into the face of one of the players, with a shout of "Cheat! Cheat!"

According to Mr. Eleutheros, the Comte de Rozart, the player in question, was a gentleman of unsmirched reputation. The accusation was baseless, and the only explanation possible was that Archie Clutter, exasperated by his very serious losses—for they were playing stud-poker with an unlimited rise—and by the length of the sitting, had been suddenly mastered by his passionate temper. Mr. Eleutheros, indeed, reproached himself in the handsomest fashion for having allowed the game to go on for so many hours and the stakes to rise so high.

"Yes, I am to blame. I am very deeply to blame, Monsieur le Président," he said frankly in the Assize Court, and his admission was punctuated with many censorious "Ah's" and "Oh's" from the pen in which stood such of the public as could crowd into the court. "But it was difficult. Archie Clutter was the great loser. We could not break off the game unless he consented, and he insisted on continuing." Here the "Ah's" and Oh's" took on a milder tone of comprehension, almost of sympathy. Mr. Eleutheros had his difficulties as host. Yes, that began to see itself!

"Besides," the frank man continued, "we were shut up in that thin air, so high above the world, so isolated, with the snow plastering the windows, we were none of us quite normal, I think."

The spectators in the pen, and even the law-students in the body of the court, were inclined to believe that the observation was just. Certainly a psychological effect was to be expected from the forced sequestration. Opinion began to sympathise with the loyal Mr. Eleutheros, who would take upon his shoulders the blame for the crime committed by his guest.

For a crime had been committed. There was no possibility of doubt about that. Moreover, the crime committed had been the irreparable one. As soon as the blow was struck, Mr. Eleutheros, being eminently a man of peace, had sought safety behind a writing-table in the corner of the room. From that vantage he exhorted his two remaining guests, of whom one managed his horses, and the other was his handy man and jackal.

"Clutter's mad. Hold him, Kettler! Hold him, Paton."

Kettler and Paton flung themselves at once upon Archie Clutter, seizing his arms, and there the brawl might have ended, or, at all events, have been adjourned until the nerves of the party, frayed by excitement and want of sleep, had recovered their calm. Unfortunately the Comte de Rozart, after picking himself up from the floor with a bleeding forehead, sprang lightly forward and slapped the struggling and helpless Clutter again and again upon the cheeks with his open hand.

"There is for you!" he cried. "And there! And there, pig that you are!"

A moment of confusion and whirlwind ended all. Archie Clutter possessed naturally a strength which the slenderness of his figure belied. A Berserk rage doubled it. He flung his two custodians from him, and seizing by the neck an empty champagne bottle which stood within reach of his hand upon a sideboard, he in his turn struck and struck again. The bottle burst into fragments, the Comte de Rozart crumpled and slid down the wall to the floor, and even then Archie Clutter was not content with

his work. He must dash the jagged fragment of glass, which his hand still grasped, down upon the face of the dead man, already masked in blood. Mr. Eleutheros screamed at the top of his voice, some of his guides and huntsmen came running from their quarters through the snow. The room became a shambles of broken furniture and men cursing and whirling. The very sash of the window was burst from its frame, and the floor, slippery with blood and snow, gave no purchase to the feet. A rope was brought, and, corded like a package from neck to heels, Archie Clutter was flung into an adjoining room and there locked in.

Thus far, the facts of the case. Mr. Ricardo turned now to the description of the concluding scene. By the offices of his good friend, Hanaud, he had secured a seat amongst the law-students in the well of the court; and through the smudged and dingy lines of foreign print he looked now as through some magic window opening upon ancient days. The Judge and his Assessors, in their red robes, confronted him upon the bench. From his pulpit, just above the jury, the Procureur Géneral—he red-robed too—launched his violent denunciation. From the well of the court in front of the dock, the famous grey-bearded Maître Virobert replied with floods of sentiment, and the jury, after a short retirement, returned its verdict.

Mr. Ricardo listened once more to the scathing savagery of the President of the Court, who seemed to wield a cudgel rather than pronounce a judgment. He heard the very tones of the resonant voice as clearly as through the ear-pieces of a wireless set; and the appalling sentence: Twenty-one years of servitude in one of the penal colonies of France. And, as they had done on that actual day ten years ago, his eyes turned towards the prisoner in the dock standing between his gendarmes.

Mr. Ricardo was what the French euphemistically call an amateur. It is truer to say that he had become so in

his later years. He had developed a passion for the horrible and the bizarre. His favourite walk in Paris was taken under the colonnades of the Palais Royal. Were a crime committed, he must hasten to the spot, bribe his way into the very room, and reconstruct with a delicious shiver of fear the horrors which had there taken place. Thus every detail of Archie Clutter's appearance during those terrible moments had been so greedily observed that it needed but a glance at these cuttings to restore the portrait. He was a young man of twenty-nine, and looked even younger than his years. He was noticeable for the quiet perfection of his dress, in which there was trace neither of dandy nor sloven, and the scrupulous care which he devoted to his body. From the fineness of his linen to the tips of his fingers his fastidiousness was written upon him. Thus he had stood, comely, even elegant, and then had wilted and dropped like a log upon the floor of the dock.

Mr. Ricardo closed his book of cuttings and put it away on its shelf.

"Archie Clutter escaped then," he reflected. "Escapes are not so rare from those convict stations. The French look to the sharks as their best jailers. But every now and then one or two get through."

He went upstairs to bed. He could have no shadow of doubt. The slim elegant youth who had dropped like a man shot through the heart ten years ago at Grenoble was the waiter whom he had seen at the Semiramis Hotel to-night; his body thickened, coarsened and hardened, his face disfigured and gross with a baleful look, which told that the ungovernable rage that once from time to time had mastered him, now burnt steadily and fiercely within him, a disciplined servant on the chain.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: *The Two Gentlemen from Cayenne*

MR. RICARDO did not resent, as so many people do, a suggestion by any of his acquaintances that he was getting old. On the contrary, he recognised certain advantages in the slow advent of old age. He no longer had to invent excuses for not playing games or indulging in violent sports. He received consideration, too, from the polite people of younger generations. He was frequently addressed by them as "sir." But he did feel the gradual decadence of the body to be a humiliation; and so a longer and longer time was allotted in the morning before he was prepared to face in public the light of day.

At eight o'clock his valet, Elias Tomson, after knocking twice, with an interval between the knocks, entered the darkened bedroom, placed the tea-tray on a table at the side of the bed, the newspapers on the bed itself, and retired without a word. By means of a silk cord, finished with a green and gold tassel and an ingenious arrangement of pulleys, Mr. Ricardo was able to withdraw his curtains without leaving his bed and let the morning light flood the room. He then drank his tea, read his newspapers, and smoked a couple of Turkish cigarettes taken from an onyx box. At nine o'clock he rang his bell, and Elias Tomson, proceeding at once to the bathroom, mixed the hot and cold water by the help of a thermometer to the exact degree of heat required, added the precise quantity of bath salts, stropped the razor and set the shaving-water, knocked again upon the bedroom door and again retired. Mr. Ricardo then rose from his bed, donned a brocaded dressing-gown, and passing through a

private doorway between his bedroom and his bathroom, entered upon the mysteries of his toilet.

On the morning, however, after the dinner at the Semiramis Hotel, the leisurely business was interrupted. Mr. Ricardo was still splashing in his bath when his valet announced, through the panels of the door, that a man urgently insisted upon seeing him at once.

"A man! Nonsense!" cried Mr. Ricardo fretfully—for he had not slept very well. "My habits are well known. Tell him to return at a more gentlemanly hour," and he continued to splash.

But only for a very little time. For an uneasiness gained upon him. He dressed more quickly than he had dressed for years, and it was little after half-past nine when he descended into his dining-room. On the table by his plate and apart from his usual batch of letters lay a soiled cheap envelope with his name upon it, but no stamp. Mr. Ricardo turned the envelope over. It was gummed down. Mr. Ricardo rang the bell, and upon Tomson's appearance he asked:

"That man who called here?"

"He has gone, sir. He refused to wait and he left that letter."

"Did he write it here?"

"No, sir, he produced it from his pocket. He said that it was most important that you should have it at once."

"No doubt," said Mr. Ricardo, with a laugh, and he tossed the envelope lightly aside. Begging letters were always most important. He was quite reassured until Elias Tomson added:

"Important to you, sir."

"To me?"

"That is what he said. He was, indeed, quite contumacious about it."

Elias Tomson had a love for a good long fine-sounding word, and when he came across one he made a note of it.

But the application of it was apt at times to baffle Mr. Ricardo: as now.

"Contumacious?" he asked, feeling no longer quite so reassured.

"Well, I might say nasty," Elias conceded.

Mr. Ricardo disliked that word intensely. It threatened to take away altogether his appetite for breakfast.

"What sort of man was this?" he asked.

"From his pomatum and his pointed shoes, Soho, I think."

Mr. Ricardo nodded his head.

"A small man?"

"Typical," replied Elias. "Quite Lilliputian, sir."

"And nasty?"

"Extremely nasty."

"Very well, Tomson;" and Tomson left the room.

Mr. Ricardo had certainly lost his appetite. He nibbled at a piece of buttered toast and sipped his hot coffee, but his eyes and his thoughts were all upon that dirty envelope.

"This is cowardly," he reflected. "Most undignified and cowardly."

He picked the envelope up and slit it open at the edge. He shook out a folded sheet of the commonest foreign paper, crossed from side to side and from top to bottom with fine blue lines, so that its whole surface was covered with little squares. Mr. Ricardo spread out the paper and read the few words scrawled upon it in a spidery sloping hand.

Please to meet me at ten o'clock in Duke Street Garden, and please to come alone, if you value your good.—Hospel Roussencq.

Now, Mr. Ricardo valued his good extremely, no one more so. He recognised, holding himself, as it were for trial, that he had been unduly talkative last night, and people who were unduly this, that, or the other, must pay for their unduliness. It was only just and right that they

should. Therefore he would keep this appointment in the Duke Street Garden—merely as an act of reparation and penance. He stood up and looked at the clock. The hands marked the time as twenty minutes to ten and the meeting place was barely five minutes from his door. Yes, in ten minutes, so that he might be punctual, he would set out—and suddenly Mr. Ricardo felt very cold. He had no longer any bones in his legs, so that he collapsed in his chair, and his heart turned suddenly over inside of him and there was such an emptiness and sinking in the pit of his stomach that he seemed to be descending in a lift of incredible velocity to incredible depths in the bowels of the earth.

"Brandy," he whispered to himself, "brandy!" and now he was in a panic lest his strength should fail him altogether and Hospel Roussencq should wait for him in vain. Clutching here at the edge of the table, there at the back of a chair, he hoisted himself on to his feet and crept unsteadily to the sideboard. He filled a wineglass to the brim with a much-prized liqueur cognac, and drank it slowly. A little colour returned to his faded cheeks; he stood upright; he walked.

Outside the house, in the sunlight and fresh air, he felt better. He must certainly see this troublesome business through, once for all, and have done with it. The sight of a policeman six feet tall strolling, Olympian and good-tempered, round the corner into Duke Street revived his courage. After all, a foreigner plastered with pomade and in spiky shoes! Lilliputian, too! An admirable, enheartening word.

The garden lies on the west side of Duke Street, not a hundred yards from where it debouches into Oxford Street, and is laid out upon the roof of a huge transforming station belonging to the Metropolitan Electric Supply Corporation. It is reached by a couple of flights of stone steps, which mount one on each side of the great arched doorway of the station. This doorway is surmounted by

a heavy stone cupola and ornamented with Doric columns.

Up the nearest of these flights of steps Mr. Ricardo climbed. He found himself upon a broad oblong terrace, paved with red and white tiles and enclosed within low stone walls. Rows of privet trees planted in big tubs of concrete ran from end to end; a circular fountain occupied the centre; and wherever possible, banked against the stone walls and massed round the stems of the privet trees in the concrete tubs, geraniums blazed. A big stone seat shaped in a segment of a circle projected from each side wall halfway down the terrace and commanded its approaches.

On the left-hand seat a youth and a girl were holding hands. Mr. Ricardo's bosom swelled in sympathy with that couple. They were lost to the world, yet the merest cry for help would bring them back to it. Happily, he discovered, there are always and everywhere a youth and a girl holding hands. Almost he took off his hat to them. If only they would stay in this charming spot, planning out slowly the successive stages of their life, he would be very much obliged. For on the opposite seat one little man sat alone behind an opened newspaper. As Mr. Ricardo approached, Hospel Roussencq folded his newspaper and crouched forward with his elbows upon his knees and a pair of hard, bright, red-rimmed eyes piercing into him, until he fancied that he must be as transparent as a window-pane. It was the little waiter of the Semiramis banqueting-room, but there was not a trace of the obsequious servitor about him now. Nasty, Mr. Elias Tomson had declared him to be, and nasty he was.

Mr. Ricardo had timed his approach to the second. For he was still some yards away from the stone seat when all the clocks in the neighbourhood struck ten, and resonant above them all from far away sounded the deep majestic notes of Big Ben.

"You are punctual, old one," said Roussencq. "How

wise you are! For there are bad marks agianst your name, you know."

"Bad marks!" Mr. Ricardo retorted, with a fine show of spirit. After all, he was in the heart of London on a morning of June. The blaze of flowers, all those high windows looking down up on the terrace, the keeper of the garden in his glass box, and just across the oblong the young lovers—these circumstances braced Mr. Ricardo. "Nonsense! I am not a schoolboy to receive bad marks, and if I were, you would not be my master."

"There are other places than schools where bad marks are given," said Roussencq unpleasantly.

Mr. Ricardo took him up instantly.

"Prisons?" he replied. "Yes, no doubt prisons. But then I am not a convict, and if I were, you would not be my jailer."

Mr. Ricardo was pleased with his rejoinder. But he would have felt more at his ease, even in the safe environment of the garden, if only Hospel Roussencq would move. But he sat with the immobility of a man inured to discipline. He made not the smallest gesture. Not a muscle of his face twitched; and there was in the unwinking stillness of his eyes a look with which the older man was familiar but which he could not explain.

"So it is like that!" said Roussencq softly. "We take the high hand. Then some words must speak themselves. To make the importance, you meddle in things which do not concern you. Very, very well. But they must not be big things. For big things have danger in them. Last night when I stopped you, you were meddling in big things."

"I am not to be frightened," said Mr. Ricardo. But he was beginning to be a little troubled by that bright, unflinching, and somehow familiar stare.

"A wise man would be very frightened, old one," Roussencq retorted. "Yes, even here, in this garden with all the windows looking at us. For you know where we

come from, my friend and I. Yes! I make no hidings with you. We come from Cayenne. Listen whilst I tell you! Then you will sit very quiet in your fine house and give no trouble to my friend and me."

Eight years Archie Clutter had had of it; six years Hospel Roussencq. Roussencq gave Mr. Ricardo a sketch of that appalling inferno in the tropics. Sometimes they worked stark naked clearing the ground; sometimes in canvas trousers and jackets, with their numbers on their breasts, they manned the boats of the service. At night they were locked in cages, a platoon of them for each cage, and chained by the ankle to their plank beds. But here a man would slip his foot through a ring, there another would pick the lock with a nail. Lamps made out of a sardine tin, some oil and a wick would be lighted; cards would be produced, and money. For everybody had money.

"It was forbidden—yes. But every one had it concealed—where it could not be found. It is all revolting—yes."

No warder ever dared to enter those cages when they were locked for the night. So the forbidden lamps burned and the forbidden money was won and lost; and when those eleven hours of horror and abomination were over, a convict stabbed to death, strangled, beaten to a red pulp, was no very unusual spectacle. For no one slept; and all lived on the edge of insanity, slaves of wild paroxysms, bitten by morbid delusions. And for punishments, six months, a year, two years, of the dungeons on the Isle St. Joseph, half the time in twilight, half in the pitch dark, not a chair, not a rag for covering, not even a stretcher to sleep upon. A pail and a jug of water the whole furniture of the cell.

"And you think we go back there, my friend and I," continued Roussencq in his smooth voice, "because one old man wishes to make the importance? No! We are dead people, do you see? We escaped on the mortuary

table for a raft. Some friends, the Brethren of the Coast —it is their profession—picked us up at sea and landed us in Dutch Guiana, and in the end we came to Venezuela. So! But for the French we are dead. The sharks have eaten us. . . ."

And suddenly Mr. Ricardo understood to his discomfort why the look in Roussencq's eyes stirred his memories. Mr. Ricardo, the dilettante glutton of other people's sensations, had been an assiduous frequenter of prize-fights. At the Albert Hall, at the National Sporting Club, at the Ring in Blackfriars Road, his seat was retained in the front row, and the bright, keen, concentrated look which held him now as by a spell was exactly the look which transfigured the fighting man when he left his corner and faced his antagonist.

"I have no wish to send you back," he replied in a voice which would quaver.

"Neither me nor my friend?" asked Roussencq.

"Neither you nor your friend."

"Then you hold the lips together, so!" and for the first time the little man moved. He took his upper and his lower lip between his forefinger and his thumb and pressed them together. "Or they never talk again. We are here for our plans. We do not mean to live as waiters attending on old foolish gentlemen at the Semiramis Hotel. No! It is we who are going to make the importance. So you promise me now not to go on with that conversation I interrupted last night."

"I have no wish——" Mr. Ricardo began, but Roussencq took him up at once.

"You promise me!"

Out of the tail of his eye Mr. Ricardo saw the lovers rise from the bench opposite and make their way towards the steps. A sense of desolation swept over him. He would have liked to cry out to them to stop. He felt suddenly that he was standing helplessly in a very Sahara of tiles.

"Yes, I promise you," he said.

Hospel Roussencq leaned back. He took off his shabby billycock hat and exposed his sleek pomaded head. He took a packet of Caporal cigarettes from his pocket, lit one and smoked.

"I am going," said Mr. Ricardo.

He was utterly humiliated. He, the student of the macabre and horrible, had cut the poorest figure in an interview when he should have shone. If only Hanaud had been with him! Hanaud would have gobbled up that little waiter in one mouthful. Promises! He tried and failed to imagine Hanaud making promises to a fugitive from Cayenne. Yet from his own lips they had dropped as meekly as summer rain.

"I am going."

But Roussencq held up a forefinger. That was now enough to arrest Ricardo. One had only dabbled, the other had done; and he who had done was master.

"In a minute you go. When I tell you. But I say to you now two things, so that you keep your promise very faithfully."

Mr. Ricardo jerked up his head. After all, he was safe. There was to be no tragedy on the tiles of the Duke Street Garden.

"When I give my promise——" he began haughtily.

But Mr. Ricardo was fated not to finish his sentences that morning. For Hospel Roussencq interrupted him offensively.

"Pah, pah, pah! When you give your promise, you break it as soon as a Cabinet Minister. But now I tell you two things and then you keep it. Listen!"

Roussencq looked about him carefully. The garden was now quite empty. Even its keeper was no longer to be seen. The windows which overlooked it were out of earshot and it was raised twice a man's height above the four surrounding streets. For such confidences as Hospel Roussencq was now to make it was the perfect trysting-

place. Yet Hospel Roussencq dropped his voice, though for the first time a smile flickered on his lips.

"That fine motor-car of yours, eh? With the crest upon the panels. You make the importance with that fine motor-car, as you make it in your talk—and just as foolishly. When you drove home from the Semiramis Hotel last night, you were brought to a stop in Coventry Street, eh?"

Mr. Ricardo started. How in the world did Roussencq know that?

Roussencq crossed an ankle over a knee, puffed at his cigarette and waited.

"Certainly. It was soon after eleven," said Mr. Ricardo. "We got into the theatre traffic. At the top of the Haymarket a policeman held us all up for four or five minutes at the most."

"Four or five minutes were three or four minutes more than enough," said Hospel, his smile becoming more pronounced while his head moved slowly from side to side with a curious rhythm which haunted Mr. Ricardo. He was not so much a mouse in front of a cat as a bird in front of a snake, spellbound to the point of paralysis.

"What a blur of lights!" continued Hospel. "What a throng of carriages, all locked together! What a jostle of people hurrying on the pavement! And what a lot of men running in and out amongst the wheels, crossing the street, offering the latest editions of the night papers, selling matches! And everybody shouting! What a din!"

"It is a noisy corner at that time of night," Mr. Ricardo agreed. His heart sank, but he could not have explained why. A great fear was upon him and once more turning his blood to water; and still that sharp venomous black head turned rhythmically from side to side, whilst the smile never left his lips nor did the glitter fade from the eyes.

"We watched your car, my friend and I, and when it stops, we ask one another: 'Shall we?' So easy for us

in all that confusion and noise—for us who have learnt to be quick. A minute? Pouf! For us, ten seconds!"

"What do you mean?" stammered Mr. Ricardo, his cheeks as white as paper.

"We dive under the wheels, my big friend and I. He has an evening paper. I stand on his left side between him and the chauffeur, my friend—he open the door, oh, so quickly! He lean in and cry 'All the winners!' Perhaps the chauffeur says 'Get out!' Perhaps, my friend is so quick and the noise is so great, and the chauffeur so anxious in the traffic, he notices nothing at all. In any case, the door is closed again and my friend and I are once more in the crowd upon the pavement, and the fine motor-car rolls on to Grosvenor Square with Mr. Ricardo still sitting in the dark inside of it. But a Mr. Ricardo who does not get out when the fine motor-car glides up to the door. Yes, we discuss that on the pavement, my friend and I—there!" and swiftly Roussencq leant forward, as if indeed he was a serpent striking, or a steel spring which the lightest touch would change to a streak of lightning.

"There!" he said again, and the tip of his forefinger touched Mr. Ricardo over the heart. "Not a cry. Not a groan!"

Mr. Ricardo seemed at that moment to die a thousand deaths. So swift and accurate and daunting was the thrust of that forefinger that he felt it pierce into his vitals and let in the cold of both the poles.

Roussencq leaned back again upon his seat and folded his index finger down.

"That is the first thing I tell you. Now for the second. You are afraid of me. Yes, your mouth is dry, old man, and you are shaking. But I am nothing. Understand that in your bones! I am nothing at all. But my big friend with the cigar-box—eh? He is different. For me, I was born in the gutter. Cayenne was bad, yes, but I could do. My friend, no! He was used to silk against

his skin. For him every hour of Cayenne was a year of torture, and all those years of torture burn in him like one great fire. So keep out of his way, old man! He has the brains too!" and Roussencq tapped his forehead. "Even in the prison, he was the great man, the leader. The jailers knew it, the officials consulted him. He was the chief, the master. Bend down you head to me!"

Mr. Ricardo, on the contrary, recoiled. What horrible and ghastly thing had the little Frenchman still to tell him?

"There is no one to overhear us," he stammered. "There is nothing more I need to hear!"

But Roussencq had gauged his man. With a deliberate artistry, he had kept to the very last the supreme proof of his hero's pre-eminence in that awful colony of lost and perverted souls; and he meant that it should be an inviolable seal upon Mr. Ricardo's lips.

"Bend down your head, so that I may whisper to you what I only whisper to myself."

Reluctantly Mr. Ricardo obeyed. Hospel Roussencq held him down by the lapel of his coat and spoke so secretly in his ear that he appeared to be afraid lest the very birds should understand him and pipe his revelation as a message to the world. He had whispered very few words, before he must needs spring up and support Mr. Ricardo with his arm. For without it the old man would have fallen. With pleasant shivers he had played amongst the records of grim crimes and their penalties. Now that he met them in the gate, without his hero Hanaud at his side, his knees shook beneath him.

"Yes, you will keep your promise now," said Hospel Roussencq. "You will not interfere with my friend's plans. You can go."

How Mr. Ricardo climbed down from that high garden, and how he reached his home, were mysteries to him afterwards. He came to himself in his library and sat with his head in hands, shading his eyes from that long

row of folio volumes with the dates in gold upon their backs.

"I have had my lesson," he said to himself, and repeated the phrase, as if it brought him comfort. "Yes, I have had my lesson."

A knock sounded upon the panels of the door, and his servant Elias Tomson entered, bearing a card upon a silver salver.

"This gentleman would like to see you, sir, for a few minutes."

Mr. Ricardo took the card and read the name of Lieut.-Colonel John Strickland. For a moment he was at a loss. Then he recollected. John Strickland was the man who had spoken of Burma, who had first called his attention to Archie Clutter. In a frantic whisper, Mr. Ricardo addressed his servant.

"I am not well. I can see no one this morning."

He heard a colloquy in the passage immediately afterwards. Would this soldier force himself into his presence, bid him as an honest man and a citizen to speak out what last night he had not spoken, harass him with questions—perhaps, even have his way? . . . With an enormous relief Mr. Ricardo heard the front door close and retreating steps upon the pavement. He rang for Elias Tomson.

"Tomson," he said, "I shall never be in to Colonel Strickland."

"Very well, sir," Tomson replied. "I shall be meticulous upon the point."

Not for the wide world would Mr. Ricardo interfere with any of Archie Clutter's plans.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: *The Case of Clutter versus Corinne*

"I FAILED. He refused to see me. I expected it," said Strickland.

Ariadne Ferne, Corinne and he were taking their luncheon in the garden of a wayside hotel upon the Portsmouth road. On the other side of the thoroughfare a lake shone in the sunlight like a great smooth shield of silver; and all about the lake and about the three in the garden stood a forest of pines, each of the trees a warm and friendly brown when seen from near at hand, but massed together in the distance a wall of black. Not a breath of wind stirred them this morning or broke the water of the lake with a ripple; and not a cloud floated overhead. June was at its freshest and loveliest in that quiet corner. The broad highway curved out of fairyland upon the left and disappeared again into fairyland upon the right. It would have been fitting and natural if some young mailed knight with his vizor thrown back and his lance at his side had ridden joyously into view, mounted on a great steed like a cart-horse, and had asked them if they knew of any beautiful maidens thereabouts who were held in duress by enchanters and wanted a live young man to rescue them.

The only man of that quality, however, present was seated in the garden and wondering at the recuperative powers of young women who could pass a night in agitation and fear and the next day match the morning with the freshness of their faces. There was not even a shadow under the brown eyes of Corinne.

Strickland turned to her.

"So it is now for you, isn't it, to tell me exactly what you fear?" he suggested.

"Yes . . . no doubt."

Corinne agreed, but she was at a loss how to begin. Strickland remarked a wariness creeping into her eyes and a quick, inquisitive glance directed towards him. A parallel forced itself into his thoughts against his will. Thus might a guilty prisoner look when interviewing the counsel who was to defend him at his trial—doubtful how much of his guilt he dare reveal if he was still to retain his counsel's services.

"Shall I help you?" he asked.

"Please!"

"Well, then! The man who killed Maung H'la in the jungle, the waiter who was so interested in Battchilena's name, is Elizabeth Clutter's widower?"

"I suppose so . . . I think so. . . . That's just what we wanted you to find out. . . . It must be so."

Corinne progressed grudgingly from her conjectures to her definite conclusion under Strickland's gaze; once started, she went on. In that summer garden she told the story of Archie Clutter which Mr. Ricardo had read the night before in his book of cuttings.

"So that's it!" said Strickland, and his face grew very grave. Corinne's narrative, cautious as it was, confirmed in so illuminating a fashion the analysis and portrait he had imagined in the moonlit glade behind Mogok. The fallen Lucifer! The rebel who had plunged in a flash a thousand miles deep into a hell of anguish and torment and privation made a thousand times more hell by contrast with that upper life of well-being and independence from which he had been hurled. Hospel Roussencq had crammed it all into his one homely phrase, "Clutter—he had been used to silk against his skin." And now Clutter was free. He had worked himself loose from his shackles and his house of bondage. And here he was in England, famished, mauled, disfigured, half brute and wholly

demon, and, to crown all, stripped of all hope here, the very money which might have restored him spent and wasted by such flimsy idols of their year as Battchilena and Corrine. That Archie Clutter would strike—was there a doubt of it? He had already struck once, in the jungle—a single, sufficient, masterful stroke. He would strike again; surely he would. But in what way? How? The mere fact that he took his time daunted Strickland. Somewhere in the darkness he was forging a new weapon.

Strickland remained silent, his eyes wandering here and there about the garden and always coming back to rest anxiously upon Ariadne Ferne's lovely face. On such occasions a faint wave of rose would mount over her throat and cheeks, and her eyes avoided his. For when these two met that morning after their brief separation, a curious constraint rose between them and would not be exorcised. Strickland, indeed, was so possessed by it that he had again and again to bring his thoughts violently back to the peril he was there to dispel.

"If we could get a clue to Clutter's plans!" he said with longing, and Corinne shivered and hitched about her shoulders the chinchilla coat in which she had motored out of town.

"Couldn't he be sent back?" she asked and looked away, a little ashamed of her question. "I know it sounds horrible and callous, and yet——" Her voice trailed away.

Strickland shook his head.

"The French authorities would have to move, and would they? Officially no doubt Clutter's dead, and we have no evidence to prove that he isn't. You are convinced that he's still alive, so am I, so is Ariadne, so is Battchilena. But what do our convictions amount to?"

"Nothing," Ariadne agreed; and they all fell to silence.

Strickland found himself wondering for the hundredth time how strong the case for Archie Clutter actually was, the case of Clutter versus Corinne. It might be a help to know. If it was a weak case, why, a word might be

dropped in an influential quarter, some steps of an unofficial kind might be taken to warn off Archie Clutter. But on the other hand there were the hints of the cautious Captain Thorne of the Burma police. Clutter's case could hardly be a weak one. Still, to know would be valuable.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question or two?" he said abruptly to Corinne.

"Not a bit," she answered. "Let me light a cigarette first!"

She took an inconceivable time, however, over that simple act, bending down her face and holding the match in the cup of her hands as though a gale were blowing.

"Now," she said briskly, and she sat forward in her chair.

The first question certainly gave her not a moment of embarrassment.

"Did you know before yesterday that Archie Clutter had escaped?"

"I hadn't an idea of it," she said.

"Yet the moment I told my story about the man in the jungle, Battchilena had no doubt about his identity. Nor had you when he repeated it to you."

"That's quite true," Corinne agreed. "But you had described Archie Clutter. Leon saw him standing against the wall in the banqueting-room."

"But you had never seen him in your life. Nor had Battchilena. You couldn't have—either of you. Clutter was sentenced ten years ago."

Corinne flushed a little. She sat a little further forward.

"Elizabeth had often spoken of him to me. Their life together had been quarrelsome. She was very unhappy about him. Oh, I seemed to know him. Your description was enough."

"For Battchilena too?"

"I had passed it on to Leon, no doubt."

Strickland moved restlessly. The explanation was to

him too weak for words. Even Ariadne, in spite of her loyalty, wore an air of discomfort. But it passed at once when Corinne added:

"Of course I knew he was going to try to escape."

"Oh, you did?" Strickland exclaimed.

"To be sure, I did," she returned in surprise at his question. It seemed that she expected him to be aware of that.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"A letter came——"

"From him?"

"No! From a man in Dutch Guiana. There is a little band of people there who make it their business to assist in escapes. The Brethren of the Coast, they are called. This man was one of them. He wanted money for Archie."

Once more Corinne had climbed on to solid ground. She was speaking the truth now—not a doubt of it. That letter had arrived.

"And money was sent?" Strickland asked.

There followed just a moment's pause.

"I suppose so. Of course it wasn't my affair. I hadn't money to send, anyway. But certainly Elizabeth said she meant to forward all that the man wanted."

"But she never told you that she had forwarded it."

Corinne wrinkled her forehead and was at pains to belabour her recollections.

"I don't think so. At all events I don't remember."

"And when did this letter come?"

Corinne did not answer that question at all. The colour rose into her face. She looked at Strickland with defiance, as though she feared a trap and meant not to tumble into it. It appeared to him that in a moment she might break into a storm of tears or flame into a passion; and both possibilities he equally dreaded.

"You see, it's a time problem we have to consider," he made haste to explain. "Elizabeth Clutter died

two years ago. The money, then was sent more than two years ago. Yet Clutter only reaches Burma six months ago and England practically yesterday. It looks as if he had made some port of Venezuela or Colombia and worked his passage either westwards through the Panama Canal or eastwards round the Cape. It looks, in a word, as if the money had never reached him."

"We never really expected that it would," Corinne replied.

"It might have stayed with the man who wrote for it? Yes, I see that."

Strickland turned over that possibility carefully in his mind. To secure the addresses of the convicts' relations and obtain money from them on the excuse of providing opportunities of escape—there was nothing improbable in a trade of that kind springing up on the edge of French Guiana.

"He was sentenced to twenty-one years, too," Strickland reflected aloud. "The longer the sentence the less danger to the trade. Yes."

Very likely the money had been sent. Very likely it had been stolen by the recipient. It was very possible, in the alternative, that it had been actually used for its intended purpose but that the opportunity to escape had needed an elaborate construction. The case of Clutter versus Corinne might not be so shameful after all. It might turn out at the worst to be a case for damages rather than punishment.

Why, then, need she spoil the more attractive picture into which her pretty features were beginning to shape themselves by suddenly saying: "It was just three months before Elizabeth Clutter died that the letter came. I remember its coming now."

The date, indeed, was as good a date as Strickland could wish for. What he had dreaded was a date which had immediately preceded Elizabeth Clutter's death, or perhaps the same date. The letter demanding money for

Archie Clutter's escape arriving in the morning, for instance, and Elizabeth Clutter dying suddenly that night. The date was very well—yes. But how could she have forgotten at all so noticeable an event as the delivery of that letter? And if she had so clean forgotten it, why should she suddenly remember it?

"It looked, didn't it," he asked himself, "as if she had held back her statement until she was sure that my object in asking it meant no danger to her?"

He spoke aloud in a musing voice:

"Three months, eh?"

And he looked up at her. And he knew that she was lying.

Her eyes were fixed brightly upon him. Her lips were parted; her whole face one eager question: "Is he believing me? Am I putting it over him?"

She was not, and now would not. The letter had been delivered, yes. But three months before Elizabeth Clutter died—no! Archie Clutter's case against Corinne became all at once appallingly serious. Strickland was at pains, however, to conceal his disbelief. For the trouble in all this affair for him was Ariadne's loyalty to her friend. The argument racing through his mind ran thus:

"I can't prove to Ariadne that Corinne's lying. Even if I did, it would probably make no difference. But I can't. I can only say that I believe she is. Ariadne will then sweep me out of their councils as one of the prejudiced and a relic from the days of Mr. Disraeli"—that phrase stung a little even after three months. "She and Corinne will put their heads together, and Heaven only knows what will come of that!"

He was careful, therefore, to accept Corinne's answer without so much qualification as a movement or a look could imply.

"I suppose, then, that you were to hold Elizabeth Clutter's fortune more or less in trust, on the chance of Archie's escape," he said gently.

"A share of it," Corinne returned quickly. She was prepared for this point in the discussion. "You see, he couldn't claim it under his own name if it had been left to him, and he had escaped."

"No; I see that," Strickland agreed.

"But there didn't seem the slightest possibility that he could escape," Corinne pleaded; and though she tried to keep a note of indignation out of her voice she was not quite able so to do. There was a contrariety in things which she ought not to have been expected to expect. The world seemed banded together to cause her anxiety and trouble.

"Another eleven years, and he would have been free," Strickland said.

They had slipped into an evasive discussion of the unmentionable fact, known to them all, that the fortune had gone. The winds of twelve months had scattered it to its last guinea.

"Yes, but even then he couldn't have left the colony," replied Corinne.

"Are you sure of that?"

"It's the law. A sentence of more than seven years carries with it perpetual residence."

Corinne, no doubt, had studied the code under which Archie Clutter was imprisoned. Strickland did not dispute the statement.

"And in eleven years I should have made money again," she continued confidently. "It would have been at his disposal."

Ariadne Ferne broke in almost for the first time upon the argument.

"Oh, if I was only rich!" she cried, drumming with her fists upon the table.

For the moment Strickland thanked God that she was not. She would have tumbled her money into Corinne's lap and it would have gone the way of Elizabeth Clutter's.

"Ariadne!" said Corinne, her face lighting up with a

smile of affectionate gratitude, and she laid her hand upon her friend's and squeezed it.

Strickland had one more question to ask, and the most difficult of all.

"Listen, Corinne. We are not judges," he said, gently. "All we want is to save you from trouble. But one can't do that if one's groping in the dark. So tell me. Archie Clutter made a long journey to reach Maung H'la. For a man without money as he was, a difficult journey and probably not without hardships."

"To him?" asked Corinne. "After eight years in Cayenne?"

"He went out of his way, at all events," Strickland resumed. "That he knew of his wife's death, of the inquest, of her bequeathing her fortune to you, can't be doubted. Well, then, answer me this, Corinne: Was there any information very serious to you which Maung H'la could have given to Archie Clutter?"

The colour ebbed slowly out of Corinne's face.

"But, obviously, Maung H'la gave him none," she stammered.

"What makes you say that, Corinne?"

"Maung H'la, you say, was killed."

"Yes."

"Why was he killed except because he gave no information, having none to give?"

Strickland, however, would not accept the argument.

"Think of the man Clutter," he objected. "His mad attack upon the Frenchman in the hunting-box. And his existence afterwards in Cayenne." And the worst of that had been whispered only to Mr. Ricardo that morning and was quite unsuspected by these three people in the road-side garden. "He wouldn't set a high premium on human life, would he? Suppose that he had got just the information he wanted from Maung H'la! Suppose that he had caught him up in the jungle and frightened it out of him! What would be his next move? To slip back

quite unnoticed into England and use it. As he would have done but for the chance—chance, I call it"—and his eyes rested upon Ariadne's face—"but upon my soul, I could find a better word—that I from my *machan* in the tree saw him in the moonlight. And if he wanted secrecy and to walk unsuspected in the dark, what surer way could he have taken than the way he did take—the way of murder——"

He broke off with a cry of apology, for Corinne suddenly swayed in her chair, with her head loose upon her neck. But she was of stouter stuff than her lover Battchilena. Strickland's cry quickened her spirit in her. She more than mastered her moment of weakness, for she sprang to her feet, her face uplifted, her hands clenched at her sides.

"I won't believe that," she said in a bold, clear voice. "Maung H'la told him nothing, for Maung H'la had nothing to tell."

She stood in the sunlight, a brave, passionate figure in her simple straw-coloured frock, tense from the insteps of her slender feet in their scarlet shoes to the crown of her head. She flung out her defiance. Strickland at that moment could not but admire her. A liar she might be, a criminal she might be, but she had in the last resort the fine gift of courage. She could run, but, pressed, she could turn at bay. She evoked a response at that moment from the deeps of Strickland's character. He saw in that glimpse of her the girl of whom the *prima donna* had spoken yesterday night, who had subdued herself to the drudgery of her art in order to achieve. He understood what in her had made its strong appeal to the chivalry of Ariadne Ferne.

The moment of revelation passed. Her frame relaxed. She changed into a disconsolate, wistful stripling before their eyes.

"But I should be glad if this terror could pass away," she said in a small voice.

"I shall help you," Strickland said with more warmth in his voice than he had yet exhibited. "Listen, Corinne! I shall find out this man Clutter."

Ariadne moved sharply. A little cry of objection broke from her.

"There's nothing else we can do," he argued. "Let me once find him! Something can be arranged."

He spoke with a good deal more of confidence than he felt.

"Thank you," said Corinne, and, compelling a smile to light up her face, she daintily curtsied.

"Meanwhile, I confess," he exclaimed, "I was wrong last night when I arranged our picnic. We will go back together to your house, Corinne. We'll show the world that you have friends."

. . . . . .

They had met as he had arranged at Putney Bridge, but Ariadne Ferne had insisted that he should send his car home, and she should drive them in her little open car with a dickey behind. Strickland sat again in the dickey with a new question agitating his mind.

"Shall I be in time? Can I find this man before he strikes again?"

Not for anything would he have allowed a doubt to peep out of his eyes, or to be audible in his words. But sitting behind, as the little car with its aluminum bonnet streaked past the heather-purple commons and the pine woods, slid in and out of the traffic in Esher and Kingston, and climbed over Coombe Hill, he could give his perplexities rein. He had one clue at all events to the whereabouts of Archie Clutter—the address of the agency in Shaftesbury Avenue which had supplied him to the Semiramis Hotel.

"Shall I be in time? Shall I be in time?"

The words beat themselves out to the pulsation of the engine.

Ariadne drove them up to the door of the Doll's House at half-past four in the afternoon.

"Come in and have some tea," said Corinne earnestly. She had no wish at that moment to be alone.

Ariadne nodded to Strickland, and obediently he said: "I should love to."

Corinne opened her door and went in. Ariadne at the side of her car was busy apparently with its gear-handles. Strickland stepped to her side.

"Can I help?"

"Yes."

Ariadne did not turn her face towards him at all. Nor was there anything the matter with her gear-handles. But she said in a low voice:

"Answer me a question, Strickland. That soldier you talked about last night—so different in the field amongst his men at his chosen work from the same man in his mufti. Of the two which is the real man?"

It was a curious question which quite took Strickland aback. He could not but read into it another meaning. It was in praise of Julian Ransome that he had used the analogy of the soldier. Ariadne, however, had seen the double edge to that praise, for after all it was the man in his mufti, whether minister or soldier, who had to be lived with.

"Well?" Ariadne persisted.

He had to be honest with her. Her own honesty compelled it.

"Upon my word, I don't know," he said.

Ariadne nodded her head and abandoned her pretence of examining the mechanism of her car.

"Let us go in and have some tea," she observed.

They entered the house and closed the door. The passage was empty, the door upon the left-hand closed. "Corinne!" Ariadne called. But no answer was returned. She opened the door and, followed by Strickland, passed into the little parlour. Corinne was sitting upon a couch,

her hands pressed over her face and the tears running out between her fingers and falling in great drops upon her knees. On the floor at her feet a torn envelope and the letter it had enclosed lay scattered, and close by the letter was a latch-key. Ariadne Ferne ran to her, and standing behind the couch, dropped her hands gently upon her shoulders.

"My dear! What has happened?" she asked.

In a choking whisper from behind her hands Corinne uttered a name.

"Leon," she said.

Ariadne Ferne was startled. She looked towards Strickland, who remained by the door. The same fear was in both their minds. Archie Clutter had made his first move. "What has happened to him?" asked Ariadne in a low voice.

"He has gone."

"Left you?"

Ariadne's voice was incredulous. But without removing her hands, Corinne nodded her head, and her tears fell ever faster. Ariadne glanced down at the letter and the envelope and the key. They told their tale clearly enough. Her incredulity was swallowed up now by anger and contempt.

"Corinne! He's not worth a tear," she cried.

In a breaking voice the dancer answered:

"I know, but I loved him."

With a shrug of the shoulders Ariadne Ferne straightened herself. Her eyes went again to Strickland and a great friendliness shone in them. She could not but contrast him with the craven whose letter lay upon the ground. She made a signal to him that he should go and leave her alone with Corinne, and as he went quietly out of the door she kissed her hand to him.

It was almost with relief that Strickland walked away from the house. Clutter had not yet moved. There was still time, if only he was quick. But he must be quick!

If Clutter did strike first, however he struck, there must arise a horrible scandal in which the whole of the inquest on Elizabeth Clutter would be revived under a much more searching and violent light. And the little scene which he had just witnessed in the parlour of the Doll's House proved to him more clearly than ever that Ariadne would be in the very thick of it, championing her friend, and indifferent to all the splashes of mud with which she herself would be stained. How much time, he asked himself, had he been given?

The answer to that question had been given that morning in an attic overlooking a wilderness of red chimney-pots at the back of a dingy house in Dean Street, Soho. Hospel Roussencq had given Mr. Ricardo five minutes' grace before he himself departed from the Duke Street Garden. Thence, not without a good many devious turns and once or twice doubling upon his tracks, he made his way to Dean Street. About midway down the long street upon its eastern side stood a little French restaurant of the cheaper sort. Dingy white curtains of muslin hung across the windows, and over the door in fading letters was legible the name "Gaspard Roussencq."

Gaspard, a stout, comfortable person of middle age, with a waxed black moustache and rosy cheeks, was sweeping the floor of his restaurant, an apron about his waist, when Hospel pushed open the door. He smiled cheerily at his younger brother.

"Well? It begins, eh?" he asked.

Hospel nodded.

"Soon we pay you back, Gaspard."

Gaspard shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, that? When the time comes—no doubt. But I am well content. I was thinking of you, little man."

"I know," returned Hospel. "I go upstairs for a moment. Then I come down and help you to lay the covers for the luncheon."

Mr. Ricardo would hardly have recognised in the

younger brother of Gaspard the Hospel Roussencq who had reduced him so lately to a thing of shivers and obedience. The two brothers had the tradition of the family. They were bound by it in a strong affection.

"And the big one?" asked Hospel.

Gaspard shook with laughter.

"He called to me for a half-bottle of red wine and I took it to him. What a prince! He is still upstairs reading his newspaper and smoking his cigarettes. Yes, indeed! What a prince!"

The prince was lying on an iron bedstead with his bed clothes and a patchwork quilt still covering him. He was stretched out at his ease so far as his length of limbs would allow; his half-bottle of red wine and a yellow packet of Maryland cigarettes stood upon a broken cane-bottomed chair beside him.

"You are not up yet!" said Hospel in evident admiration. "Yes, indeed, what a prince!"

"There was once a bloke who retired from the army," quoth the prince, "and every morning afterwards his servant went into his room at six o'clock and said, 'Sir, the colonel sends word that you are late on parade.' . . . Upon which every morning the bloke replied, 'Tell the colonel with my compliments that he can go to hell, and that if he gives me any more of his lip I'll come down and kick him on the rump.' That," Archie Clutter remarked sententiously as he took another pull at his *vin ordinaire* and snuggled down under his patchwork counterpane, "is about the wittiest story in the world."

Hospel contemplated his hero all bunched up on account of the shortness of the bed.

"What a prince!" he said in a reverent voice.

The prince's lazy good-humour did not last. His eyes narrowed.

"And that decayed old tooth which we didn't extract last night? That old gossip?"

"He will hold his tongue," said Hospel.

"He had better, or I shall hold his breath," said the Prince.

There followed a rumbling at the back of Clutter's throat prolonged and low, like the growl of an animal. Out from the bed suddenly stretched the arm of Hercules, the shapely, powerful hand open, the long, sinewy fingers apart. Slowly those fingers crooked like talons, whilst with his lips drawn back from his strong teeth and the wickedest grin upon his face, Archie Clutter watched them. Ever so slowly they closed upon the palm, tightening about some invisible hindrance, crunching and crumbling it. The narrowed eyes glittered; the rumbling became a hideous purr; and when with a final jerk the great hand clenched itself in a fist, little Hospel Roussencq fancied that he heard a neck snap.

"He won't even whisper," Hospel assured his friend. "I told him what an important person you were at Cayenne. He did not like that. No, he did not like it at all."

Archie Clutter laughed. He had apparently some pleasant recollections of those days to amuse him after all. For he lay back for a little while smiling and inhaling deep into his lungs the smoke of his cigarette.

"Come," he said at length, putting a leg out of his bed. "Let us count up our money."

Hospel took from a cupboard a tin money-box and emptied it out upon the edge of the bed. There were twenty pounds in notes and two pounds three shillings in silver.

"We want two pounds seventeen shillings more," said Archie Clutter.

Hospel Roussencq consulted a little penny diary which he took from his pocket.

"We are at the Cannon Street Hotel for a luncheon, at the Whitehall Rooms for the dinner to-day. We have work every day. In a week we shall have the twenty-five pounds."

"Yes," said Archie Clutter as he sat in a nightgown on the side of the bed. "Let us say, then, the eighth day from now. We will keep that evening clear. We shall have enough besides the twenty-five pounds to dine ourselves in pleasant anticipations." Archie Clutter began to hum a light tune of the day. "I will get up now and shave, if you'll bring me some hot water."

Hospel Roussencq hurried off upon his errand, and Archie Clutter sat on the edge of his bed with his feet crossed and rattled the money up and down in the money-box. "Seven more nights and then the eighth," he said. He peered into the money-box and took out a little latch-key, own brother to the latch-key which a few hours later was to lie on the floor of Corinne's parlour. "Little traveller," he said, "we are coming to the end of our journey now." He chuckled as he tossed the key back into the box, but a spectator would have been inclined to shudder rather than to share in the chuckling.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: *One Traveller Returns*

COLONEL STRICKLAND loitered in vain in the neighbourhood of the agency in Shaftesbury Avenue. Waiters came and waiters stood about the door and chattered on the kerb; many of them small with spiky shoes and pomaded hair, but not one of these was Hospel Roussencq; many of them tall and battered, but not one of them was Archie Clutter. Those two had their engagements booked for the moment. Nor did Strickland know the names by which they went so that he could ask for them. He drifted up and down the by-streets and came round again to the front; and the days passed and his anxiety deepened. The mere fact that these men no longer solicited employment frightened him. He had reached the mood which divined a dangerous plot in everything.

On one evening he dined at a great house in a square on the north side of Hyde Park. It was a large party of thirty people, and an entertainment at which Corinne was to dance, and a supper were to follow. Ariadne Ferne and Julian Ransome were both at the dinner-party; and although it did not fall to Strickland to sit next to her at the table, he had a word or two with her in the drawing-room before dinner was announced.

"I am nervous," she said. "I have been frightened of this party all the week."

"Why?" Strickland asked in surprise.

"I so seldom go to big formal functions like this nowadays," she answered.

Strickland glanced across the room to where Julian Ransome was talking to a couple of political ladies of

the highest quality. He was in his element, contentedly pompous, archly mysterious.

"I wanted to sit next to you," continued Ariadne regretfully; "but the table's arranged, and I can't."

The regret which Strickland felt upon that score was almost counterbalanced by his delight in the assurance that Ariadne felt something of that regret too.

"But I shall see you after dinner," he said. "You are staying, of course, to see Corinne dance?"

Ariadne Ferne shook her head.

"I am going down to the House of Commons. Julian is going to make an important speech. You have heard, of course?"

"No."

"That he is likely to go as Parliamentary-Secretary to the Board of Trade."

"That's splendid," said Strickland.

"Yes, isn't it?" she replied.

But Lady Ariadne Ferne was a little out of spirits that evening and her assent a trifle listless in consequence.

"Have you any news of Archie Clutter?" she asked, dropping her voice a little.

"None," Strickland answered, and he, too, was smitten with gloom. "He has disappeared. For good, I hope."

"And don't believe," Ariadne added.

Dinner was announced at that moment, and he was separated from Ariadne. But she was seated at the one of the two round tables at which he sat himself; and almost opposite to him. She was certainly out of spirits. It might be, of course, that the whole ceremonious function was a trifle oppressive to her Bohemian soul. But her old gaiety was not there to enliven her corner. She did not ring like the true coin of gold she was. After dinner Strickland sought her out again.

"When do your rehearsals begin?"

She gave a little gasp. Then for the first time that

evening her mirth seized hold of her. She rippled with laughter, deliciously, gleefully.

"What a darling you are, Strickland! If you can say the wrong thing, you do, don't you?"

"May the Lord help me to say it oftener if it makes you laugh like that, Ariadne," he prayed piously.

She put her hand upon his arm and the laughter died out of her eyes.

"There's a tug-of-war going on," she said with a whimsical lift of her eyebrows. "The Parliamentary-Secretaryship on one side and the Rubicon Theatre on the other, and heaven knows which will win!"

She got up as she spoke, in obedience to a signal from Ransome.

"I'll come back if I am not too late," she said, "so wait, my dear, will you?"

She went off with "her man," as she had called him. There shot through Strickland's mind a speculation whether she would use just those two words still. He thrust it back as a disloyalty. But he remembered a phrase of Julian Ransome's, "All that has got to end." He, Strickland, was apparently not the only relic of the days of Mr. Disraeli.

He saw Corinne dance, a creature of fire and swift grace. There was no trace of the tears which had coursed down her cheeks at her desertion by Battchilena; not a shadow of the terror which overhung her like a cloud; not a hint of the defiance with which she had stood at bay in the road-side garden before his questions. She was just the lovely plaything which Madame Chrestoff had termed her.

Strickland did not seek her out when her performance was over. His eyes were too constantly upon the doorway, searching for Ariadne Ferne, his thoughts too busy wondering whether the gallant scheme of life she had planned was already a thing of rags and tatters. But Ariadne did not return, and at one o'clock in the morning

Strickland bade his hostess good night, and walked out into Great Cumberland Place.

He walked along in a muse, habit rather than any intention guiding his steps. Earlier in the evening a light shower of rain had fallen, and under the lamps the pavement of the sidewalks had the sheen of black marble. The night now was clear though dark, and but for that undertone of breaking surf, which never ceased, very still. Strickland seemed to have the town to himself—reserved for an hour so that he might the more lucidly explore the hopes and destiny of Ariadne Ferne. Even the belated man far down upon the opposite side of the street, of whose white scarf and silk hat and evening shoes he caught a gleam, beneath the standards, appeared to approach with a noiseless tread, so that his thoughts might not be interrupted. Then the man turned into an opening upon his right, and Strickland, as he came opposite to the spot, awoke with a kind of shock to the knowledge that he was walking down South Audley Street and that the opening was the mouth of that blind alley at the bottom of which Corinne lived.

But there was no other house except Corinne's in the alley. The man in evening dress, indeed, was already at her door. Evidently he had a latch-key. For the little black front door swung open without a sound, and the visitor melted in the doorway.

"So, after all, Battchilena has returned," Strickland reflected, and he continued on his way towards Curzon Street.

But though his thoughts were still concentrated upon Ariadne and Julian Ransome, and still busily speculating how their gallant adventure was to culminate, a strange uneasiness sprang up in him and ran as an undercurrent to his speculations. Accompanying them, throbbing in unison to them—rather like that unceasing rumble and thunder of the town. Yet unlike it in this. The distant thunder, so continuous and regular, ceased in the end to

be noticeable at all. The uneasiness made itself more and more felt, and finally forced itself into the very forefront of Strickland's consciousness. He had turned to the left down the slope of Curzon Street before it brought him to a halt.

He stood still upon the pavement, trying to trace this inquietude to its source. Battchilena? Yes, but Battchilena had fled. Were these the causes of his anxiety? Strickland was able very quickly to answer "No." Battchilena, hearing none of the ill news which he feared, might have secretly returned. And even if he had not, another might have taken his place. It is true that he had seen Corinne weeping over Battchilena's desertion of her, like a second Dido.

"But the Corinnes of the world patch their broken hearts very quickly," he reflected; and then the real cause smote him.

That belated visitor had not made a sound. It was not merely that he himself had been sunk deep in his own reveries, but the man had actually walked soundlessly; and on a still, dark night of empty streets, each one of them a sounding-board, a canyon for echoes. Strickland was sure of it; and the certainty brought with it a curiously eerie sensation, which made him lift his shoulders with a thrill of discomfort and look about him for an enemy. It was as though he had passed with an undiscerning eye the man without a shadow upon a sunlit day, and only afterwards had realised with a shock the ghostly thing which he had passed.

Strickland's memory, now stimulated into activity, acquainted him with another detail. The man had moved with extraordinary speed and—still more—with an extraordinary smoothness. For all the while he had seemed to stroll. There had not been a sign of flurry or haste. Yet Strickland had been quite close to the mouth of the blind alley when the visitor turned into it, and the door of the Doll's house was already open when it had

come into his view. Strickland turned and retraced his steps, whilst alarm suddenly rang all its bells within his breast.

They rang the louder when he came in sight of the blind alley and saw the little house glimmering white at the bottom of it. For, from the roof to the ground, not a light shone in any window. It faced the night silent and blind, guarding its secrets. What Strickland expected he could not have told. A wild scream, perhaps, tearing the night; a red flash and the sound of a report. Something of horror and shame was to leap from behind the screen of the house. And then, whilst he stood with his heart racing, a light did shine in a room upon the first floor—not a swift glare, as swiftly extinguished, but the ordinary steady light of an electric globe. And it burned in Corinne's bedroom, the room with all the dainty artillery of the toilet.

In a revulsion of his feelings, Strickland laughed aloud. Battchilena or a later lover—who cared? Probably Corinne as little as any one.

But he was inclined to see the end of this sordid episode if he could. If there was a new lover he had better know. If Battchilena had mustered up enough courage to return, he had better know that too. But he could not stand and wait in front of the house. Sooner or later a constable would come along and ask him his business. He walked accordingly northwards to Grosvenor Square, cast to the left along Grosvenor Street, cast again to the left down Park Street, and once more into South Audley Street. A hundred yards or so and he was at the corner. South Audley Street stretched to his left-hand and his right, as empty as an omnibus in the middle of the day. He walked slowly up the street again. A little way ahead of him, but on the opposite side of the road, gaped the mouth of the alley. When the Doll's house came within his view, he saw that the light was still burning in Corinne's room.

But as he passed the alley it seemed to him that there

was a movement at the bottom of it. The door was once more opening. This time he heard the slight jar as it was closed again. Corinne's belated visitor was going home. Strickland did not pause or slacken in his walk. But he crossed the road as though he was making for Mount Street, and as he crossed he looked down the street. The visitor was walking northwards too, but with the swift, noiseless stride he had used before, and the same easy smoothness, as if he strolled. At the corner of Mount Street the two men met and crossed. For a moment Strickland's blood ran cold. Corinne's visitor towered over him. Strickland saw his face and the glitter of his eyes. It was the tiger-man of the jungle, the waiter of the Semiramis Hotel—Archie Clutter.

Strickland let him go by, and as soon as he was out of sight, he raced back down the street to the house. What horrible catastrophe had happened there? During those minutes when he had been pacing the neighbouring streets, what dreadful thing? And done how silently? As he reached the mouth of the alley, a change had come over the aspect of the house. Behind the curtains of every window now the lights were burning. Strickland stopped in amazement. There was no outcry, no disturbance. Yet in the house the inhabitants—some of them, at all events—were awake. He acted upon an impulse. He walked straight to the door and knocked. In a moment or two the metal flap of the letter-box was lifted.

"Who is it?"

It was the voice of a woman which asked the question, but not Corinne's.

"John Strickland."

He heard a whispered colloquy and the door was opened. Corinne's maid had opened it. She had thrown a cloak over her shoulders and her bare feet were thrust into slippers. In the doorway of the parlour stood Corinne. She was wrapped about in a dressing-gown of blue silk, brocaded with gold and lined with swan's down.

bare like her maid's, were shod with satin mules; stood quite silent, very pale, and gazing at him strangest inscrutable eyes he had ever seen. was safe, at all events—safe and unhurt.

"I was passing. I saw that all your windows were alight," he said to excuse himself for his unconventional visit.

Corinne beckoned him into the parlour, and as soon as he had entered, she closed the door. Upon a small round table at the end of the couch stood a tumbler quite half full of a deep brown drink, and beside the tumbler a bottle of liqueur brandy.

"Yes?" she asked, her eyes still upon his face, quiet, mysterious, telling him not one smallest thing of the purposes behind them.

"I thought, perhaps, that you had a party," he went on.

"No. There was no party."

He caught a transient hint of irony in the girl's voice, but otherwise it revealed as little as her eyes. There had been one dominating idea in Strickland's mind these two years past—the idea of Ariadne Ferne. Perhaps, even more than he had ever realised, that idea struck the notes of thought and word and action. He reacted to it; it had become an instinct; and instinctively, because Corinne was secret, he practised secrecy too, lest frankness might in some way do harm to Ariadne.

"I was mislead then," he said. "For in the distance I saw a man in evening dress come out of the alley, and I thought that he must be coming away from you."

"Yes," Corinne replied. "I have had a great shock to-night." With a swift and surprising movement, she picked up the tumbler, half full of old brandy, from the console and swallowed its contents in a single draught.

"A pleasant shock," she continued. "For Leon Battchilena has come back to me. It was he whom you saw. Good night," and Strickland went out from the house.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: *At Peacock Farm*

IF John Strickland had turned to the right when he came out of Stratton Street the next morning into Piccadilly, he might very likely have spared himself the bitter sorrows and perplexities which were so soon to enmesh him. For, in that case, he would have gone straight to Ariadne Ferne with his story of the startling experience which had befallen him on the previous night. He did, indeed, hesitate for a few moments upon the pavement as to which way he should turn. But in the end he turned to the left—in search of Mr. Angus Trevor, at the offices of *The Flame* newspaper.

"Archie Clutter has a latch-key for Corinne's house" —that was the master thought in his mind, by which all his other thoughts took colour. "He can go in and out at his pleasure. There is no outcry when he goes in. Corinne and he are in a conspiracy together, and, since she lied to me about her visitor, that conspiracy means nothing but harm to Ariadne. We are to be kept in the dark until such time as they think it convenient to show their hand."

Ariadne and he had been jockeyed. Corinne's fear, so vividly shown at the "Noughts and Crosses" Club, took on now quite a different complexion. She was afraid that her conspiracy was in danger of detection.

"She played her little comedy at her house that night the more completely to pull the wool over our eyes," he reasoned, and, as he recalled his meticulous search of the premises with the two girls nervously close upon his heels, he could have kicked himself for an innocent before the whole City of London, its Lord Mayor and its Aldermen, with the Recorder thrown in.

"Happily, Ariadne won't stand for treachery. That's one thing," he argued.

Treachery was, to her, the one black, unpardonable crime. She stood firm upon that principle, a lighthouse upon a rock in the Atlantic. She did not slander her friends, and her friends must not slander her. She did not trick them, and they must not go about to get the wind of her. But could he prove treachery to her loyal mind? Suppose that she were to answer:

"But you *were* mistaken last night. It *was* Battchilena, I know, for Corinne says so."

No, it was better to turn to the left and seek Mr. Angus Trevor. Angus Trevor had given him a hint that the whole truth had not been told at Elizabeth Clutter's inquest.

"If I were to work at it," he had said, "I should try to discover whether Corinne had dropped a word or two, before her friend's death, to the effect that she expected a handsome legacy in the immediate future. For that is just the sort of imprudence which a girl harassed by creditors is likely to commit."

In his distress Strickland read a good deal more of meaning and suggestion into those words than they could bear.

"Trevor knows something," he assured himself. "And if I can only get it out of him, some definite evidence that Corinne had a hand in that woman's death, she shall leave for the Continent by the first boat and leave for good."

Thus he argued, and thus he turned to the left instead of to the right upon his urgent business. But he reached the newspaper office at an hour which was premature. Murchison had not arrived. There was no sign of Trevor; *The Flame* as yet was burning low; the great ship was running at quarter speed; from roof to basement hardly a plank quivered; the throb of its machinery was measured and sedate. Strickland read the paper upside

down for a considerable time in the ante-room to the editor's office. Then Murchison arrived, barked pleasantly at him, and telephoned for Trevor. Trevor unfortunately lived at Brixton and, though he came with all speed, yet another half-hour was consumed before he entered the office.

"You want to see me, Colonel Strickland?" he asked.

"Very much."

"The same subject?"

"Yes."

He reminded Trevor of the words he had used.

"I meant no more than I said, Colonel Strickland," Trevor replied. "That is how I should have set to work, if I had set to work. But I never did. I never had any reason to."

Trevor was speaking now with a distinct reserve in his voice, and John Strickland was utterly disappointed.

"I am sorry," he said. "I have brought you from home to no purpose, I am afraid."

"That's all right."

Strickland was gathering up his hat and his gloves. No doubt his dejection was very visible. He had once more encountered a wall separating him from the secret of the maze. Angus Trevor went to the window and looked out of it. He was a very busy young man, and people flitted in and out of his existence without leaving memories behind them as a rule. But he did remember that he had felt an unusual friendliness towards Strickland. He began, indeed, to feel it again now. Probably Strickland had some very sound reason for pursuing his inquiry.

"You see," he said, "news is news. It's my business to get it and make the most of it—and I won't say that, if it was for the paper, I wouldn't go a step or two farther to get it, than I otherwise would. But I am not out for hounding people down—especially a girl who has come up to the top from nowhere and has made a little corner

for herself in the world, which she fills very daintily. You see that, Colonel Strickland?"

"Yes, I do."

"On the other hand, I would like to serve you if I could."

Strickland put his hat and his gloves down again. Trevor took a turn across the room and stopped in front of him.

"Suppose you got the whip hand of Corinne, Colonel, what do you mean to do?"

Strickland answered him frankly.

"I should insist upon her leaving England at once."

"For how long?"

"I can't say. A very few months, perhaps."

Angus Trevor nodded his head. He had been reviving his memories of Strickland's previous visit, and of certain hints which had then been dropped.

"Until a certain marriage takes place, eh?"

The question was an uncomfortable one. During these last few days Strickland had become a little less confident that the good ship, "The Gallant Adventure," would ever set out upon its voyage.

"I can't say that," he said awkwardly. "I had better say, until I lift the embargo. It can't be for very long. Something must happen."

He was thinking of Archie Clutter, since, very soon, Archie Clutter must play his hand for what it was worth. Trevor, however, read into the words another meaning. If that marriage were not after all to take place—why, another might. He was inclined even more to help Strickland if he could.

"I feel more and more certain," Strickland continued, "that unless I can interfere a catastrophe will happen—not the little thing I used to fear—scandal and mud-slinging and a horrible defaming laughter—but a real catastrophe. I have still no actual evidence to offer you, but I know that Corinne is plotting and lying. And this, per-

haps—I don't know whether it will weigh with you at all —probably not——" He began to hesitate, but rather over a choice of words than from any reluctance to express his mind. He had to express a conviction which, on the face of it, was no more than a foolish superstition. He could only hope to secure Trevor's help by proving that from the bottom of his soul he himself believed it.

"Long ago I had a presentiment that this trouble was coming. It may sound ridiculous to you, but I was certain from the first moment when I was conscious of it that it was the one premonition and warning out of a hundred which comes true. And—this is the point—every single thing that has occurred since in connection with it has borne me out. Yes, that's absolutely true. It's like some monstrous malady which grows and deepens and spreads, regularly, steadily, towards some dreadful conclusion which the doctor hides from you. Oh, I want to avoid that conclusion. I want a cure. I must seek for it everywhere."

Whether the argument convinced Trevor or not, the sincerity and fire of the appeal certainly persuaded him.

"As a matter of fact, I did run back here after I had left you on your first visit," he said. "But you had gone. And on thinking it over, I was glad that you had gone. Just wait here for a moment, will you?"

Trevor hurried out of the room and returned again after the space of a few minutes, and there was a briskness in his manner of which there had been no sign before.

"Now, first of all," he said as he lit a cigarette, "I can't promise you any success. It's a chance, the merest chance; but I gather that you are willing to spend your time over a chance."

"Certainly," said Strickland.

"You have a car?"

"Yes."

"And the whole day free?"

"Yes."

"For we may not be back until late this evening."

"That doesn't matter," Strickland assured him.

"Very well. What I ran back here the other day to give you was an address, but, as a matter of fact, the address would have been no use to you if you had applied for it by yourself. But to-day I'll come with you. I have an hour's work to do, perhaps a little more." Trevor looked at his watch. "I shall be free at one o'clock."

Strickland rose and gathered up once more his hat and his gloves.

"Then the sooner I leave you alone, the better," he said. "If you will come to Pall Mall"—he mentioned the name of a club in that reserve of clubs—"as soon as you have finished, I will have some luncheon ready for you and the car at the door. We shall take less time that way than if we started in a big car from this neighbourhood."

Thus it was decided. Strickland went off to his club, and telephoned thence to his garage for his big car. That done, he called up Lady Ariadne Ferne, and was told that she had left the house and was not expected back for luncheon. For a second time that day chance dropped its pinch of sand into the complicated machinery of his life. Ariadne had herself telephoned to him at his flat in Stratton Street before twelve o'clock and had left an urgent message to be delivered to him the moment he returned. But he had not returned to his flat, just as he had not turned to the right at the corner of Stratton Street; and the message was not delivered until all its use had long since vanished.

Trevor arrived at the club later than he had announced; and it was two o'clock in the afternoon before the big car set out upon its long journey. It moved at first but slowly amidst the checks and traffic of the streets, its great length and dark, low body swinging round the corners with a silence that was almost sinister. Through miles upon miles of unfinished suburbs where brand-new yellow

villas elbowed out of the way low-roofed white houses which had once been farmsteads; along miles upon miles of gleaming tram-lines on each side of which new towns seemed to have sprung up over night; and then with one bound the car shot into open country, and with a purr of contentment settled to its work.

The two travellers hardly spoke at all. Trevor, with his eyes losing not a detail of the sun-lit countryside as it flashed past the windows, was registering upon his mind his impressions of the journey, of the car, of its speed and gliding smoothness, of hills which rose in front of him, a slender white riband of road between dark trees, and became imperceptibly a downward slope which they descended giddily; was already minting those impressions in phrases and storing them away in corners of his memory for use upon their fitting occasions. Strickland, upon his side, asked no questions. He was not the leader of this expedition. In his own good time the leader would talk. Meanwhile he lived over and over again the hours of the early morning. He saw the small black door open, the light go up in the bedroom on the first floor; he looked again into Corinne's undecipherable eyes; he saw her gulp down her half-tumbler of neat brandy; he heard her defiant lie—"It was Battchilena;" and the recollection was a shadow upon the landscape, eclipsing the sun. Why should she lie to him who was trying to serve her, unless she meant harm to one of his friends? And there was no other friend whom she could harm but Ariadne.

The car swung over the Chilterns and slid down into High Wycombe. A momentary smile of amusement softened the aspect of Strickland's face as he considered how little the town could have changed since "the days of Mr. Disraeli." The famous Red Lion Hotel still stood upon the main street, as it were to bear him company and to comfort him with the evidence that he was not the only relic of those days. High Wycombe was left behind, and some while afterwards, when the shadows were lengthen-

ing and the day began to cool, they passed amongst the wide green fields and high elm avenues of Warwickshire. The city of the famous spires was traversed, and half an hour afterwards, Angus Trevor, after asking a few questions of a passer-by, gave an order through the speaking-tube and the car turned off the main road into a lane between high hedges hung with honeysuckle and wild roses. At the end of the lane a clump of trees hid all but the tall, wide chimneys of an old house. Trevor spoke again through the tube and the car stopped.

"It will be better if we arrive a little unexpectedly," he said.

The two men thereupon descended into the lane. Strickland was lost in surprise. What secrets could an old house buried in the greenery and the trees of the Midlands hold about so recent and feverish a matter as this of Elizabeth Clutter and Corinne the dancer? The very aspect of the place, so quiet, serene and set apart, denied that any solution of the sordid riddle was to be discovered here. Even Angus Trevor was affected with a like fancy. For when he came in sight of the homestead itself he cried out with an incredulous laugh:

"What an office for what a trade! I never saw the house before, and I shall never get used to its application to this business."

They were standing upon a grass plot where the lane ended. In front of them was the house, a small Tudor manor of black beams and white plaster and windows of an elegance and beauty of which the very secret has been long forgotten. It was surrounded by a tiny moat, and a little wooden bridge, which could still be raised, and by the look of the shining chain and wheel, was still raised of an evening, crossed it in front of the gate. The gate was flanked by old grey walls breast high, over which the two men could see a lawn like an emerald, old yew bushes, cut into the shapes of peacocks, and a flagged path leading to the door.

Trevor crossed the bridge with Strickland at his heels and, marching up the pathway, rang the bell. There was no sign of life about the farm; not even a dog barked; and no one answered the bell. It seemed to Strickland that he had been transported into a land of dreams, or rather into a child's fairy book. For a little conventional, everyday event, yet markedly out of place in this environment, now occurred, producing just that mixture of fantasy and practical things which is the very substance of the fairy-tale. Whilst they waited in the porch a postman, with his sack upon his back and his red-banded shako upon his head, entered the gate and came up to the door with such a bundle of letters in his hand as would have done credit to a City firm. He slipped them all in a tiny Niagara into the letter-box and took himself off again after ringing the bell.

Strickland stared incredulously at Trevor. Trevor nodded his head and looked about that lonely and peaceful scene.

"Yes, seems sort of incongruous, doesn't it?" he agreed. "But it would seem a damned sight more incongruous if you could guess what was inside those envelopes."

Trevor rang the bell a third time, and at last a heavy footstep slowly approached within the passage. But the door was not opened. They heard the rattle of the letter-box and the footsteps receded. Trevor, however, had come to the end of his patience. He hammered upon the door; and the sound of the footsteps ceased altogether. Whoever had fetched those letters was standing, quite still —merely surprised? Or shaken by fear? As though, in this retired nook, he expected some dreadful message. Strickland's mood was that of one prepared for wonders. The evening light itself lay upon the fields and the silent house was unearthly and magical. Trevor hammered his challenge at the door again, and now it opened and a large, bearded man blocked up the opening.

"This is Peacock Farm, I think?" said Trevor.

"It may be," the man replied cautiously.

"I should like to see Mrs. Caroline Beagham."

The big man shook his head.

"If Mrs. Beagham lives here," he said slowly after a full minute of reflection, "she doesn't receive any visitors." He ended with a smile of contentment. He was intending to be very crafty and astute, and in his own opinion he was triumphantly successful.

"She will see me," Trevor remarked confidently, and producing a card, he handed it to the man.

"I am Mrs. Beagham's bailiff and manage the business of the farm," the man answered.

"That won't do. I am not concerned with the business of the farm," said Trevor, holding his ground.

The bailiff read the name upon the card as slowly as if he were spelling it out letter by letter. Then he made a singular remark.

"We make no complaint. Nothing of any value was taken."

"Oh!" Trevor exclaimed sharply. "Then you have had a burglary here!"

The bailiff now looked surprised—and a little chagrined. He had not been quite so politic as he imagined.

"Then you are not of the police?" he asked.

"Nothing whatever to do with the police," said Trevor cheerfully.

But the bailiff was inclined to visit his own indiscretion upon the two travellers.

"Then you have no need to come worrying us here. We buy nothing at the door, not even sewing machines. So good evening to you," he said roughly and he made as if to close the door.

"You take my card in to Mrs. Beagham," said Trevor with a sudden violence. "How dare you keep me standing here? Do you think I want to talk with you?"

The unexpected attack, carried out with every sign of

resentment, baffled the slow wits of the bailiff. He stepped back and fingered his beard.

"Oh!" he said, and again "Oh!" He looked afresh at the card. "Well, wait here!" he muttered grudgingly.

He closed the door and locked it, and his slow footsteps retreated heavily.

Trevor turned to his companion with a look of speculation in his eyes.

"Curious that, eh? I mean about the burglary. I wonder."

At what he wondered Strickland had no time to inquire, for the bailiff's footsteps were heard once more. But they approached now with a new alacrity. He opened the door, made quite a civil apology and brought them into the house. Then he led them down a narrow corridor of old gleaming panels and opened a door.

"In here," he said, and clumped away.

Strickland found himself in a bright, small parlour looking on to an orchard, and furnished in the heavy style of early Victorian days. It was ugly but solid, and the two travellers were at all events spared the gilt gimcrackery of the eighties. Antimacassars hung over the backs of chairs, wax fruit, painted such yellows and reds as real fruit even in these days of paint would have blushed to wear, stood exposed under glass cases on the mantel shelf, whilst small pictures in big, over-decorated frames hung upon walls papered with enormous roses. And everywhere—on the sofa, the chairs, the table, even on the floor which Brussels had carpeted—was spread such a litter of torn envelopes, ill-written letters, and the cheapest sort of periodical as made the room a refuse heap for a bonfire. In the window at one of those ridiculous little desks of walnut wood with twisted pillars and side drawers and a sloping, narrow, leather-covered lid, sat the inhabitant of the room, a stout, middle-aged, slatternly woman attired in a cotton wrap and with a pair of carpet slippers upon her feet. Her hair was done up in an untidy ball

at the back of her head, and she had a pale, roughly featured, large face with small eyes set too close together and a prominent, hard jaw. It was definitely an unpleasant face, but upon the appearance of Trevor it lightened to something like amiability.

The room had a scent of tobacco and on the desk at which the woman wrote was a briar pipe smoked as black as the panels in the corridor. This was Mrs. Caroline Beagham.

"Carrie," said Trevor as he shook her by the hand, "you owe me a good turn, don't you? I saved you from appearing as a witness in a libel action which would have blown your flourishing little factory sky-high, didn't I? Went to no end of trouble to get the case settled out of court. Not for your beautiful eyes, you will say. Agreed. Your beautiful eyes, Carrie, were purely incidental. But they were saved, weren't they? So now stand and deliver! I want you to help my friend, Colonel Strickland."

Mrs. Beagham rose from her desk, swept the litter from two arm-chairs and invited her guests to be seated.

"Gentlemen, you can smoke," she said, and lighting her own briar pipe, she sat down at her ease in a third chair. Mrs. Beagham's voice was hard like her face, and of a high pitch. But, again, it was not unamiable. The interview certainly was beginning in a more promising style than the encounter with the bailiff could have led the two men to anticipate.

"I haven't said a word to Colonel Strickland about the way in which you possibly may be able to help him. I propose to do so now. You can rely upon his reticence."

"A gentleman and a soldier," Caroline Beagham agreed, speaking with a provincial accent.

Strickland blushed and bowed, and Angus Trevor turned to him.

"Mrs. Beagham has a touch of genius," he observed. "You can recognise it in her face and in the eccentricity of her dress."

A glimmer of a smile appeared in the woman's eyes.

"Get along with you, mister," she said, puffing at her pipe.

"She invented an ingenious and lucrative business," he resumed, getting along as he was bidden. "This old and innocent manor is the clearing house for the scandals and gossips and secrets of the butlers and servants belonging to the gentry of England. The business is conducted on the strictest principles. All information is paid for at its commercial value; and he who once lets Carrie in can never more be officer of hers. From this sylvan retreat radiate the spicy pars about Lady O—— and Mr. T—— and the Duke of Omnium Gatherum. Here, too, the prudent money-lender can discover whether he had better send another registered envelope stuffed with bank-notes or whether to put on the screw instead. A host of useful duties are discharged in this house. It would not be too much to say that Carrie is one of the Pillars of Society, though to be sure it is a Pillar in the crypt rather than one in the transept."

Mrs. Caroline Beagham listened to Angus Trevor's oration with the kind of amusement which a very serious philosopher might feel in the antics of a funny man at a fair.

"These London gentlemen do go on," she said complacently to Strickland. She looked again towards Angus Trevor. "Yes, I said I would prove my gratitude if ever I could. What do you want of me?"

Angus Trevor dropped his air of raillery.

"All the details you possess with reference to Elizabeth Clutter and Corinne the dancer."

What little expression there was and what little colour ebbed out of Mrs. Beagham's face as she listened. But for the eyes in it, it might have been taken for a vegetable. The body too was suddenly very still.

So she sat for the space of a good many seconds. Then, lifting herself with an effort out of her chair, she

opened the parlour door. In some neighbouring room a typewriting machine was now clicking and clacking and ringing its tiny bell after brief intervals, as if Society was indeed only preserved from tumbling to pieces by the work done in Peacock Farm.

"Judy!" shouted Mrs. Beagham; and the clack of the typewriter ceased. "My daughter," she explained to her visitors; and a tall and very pretty girl in a red dress ran briskly into the room.

"You wanted me, mother——" she began, and stopped as she caught sight of the two men.

Judy was twenty-one years old and, to make up perhaps for the slatterliness of her mother, she was impeccably trim from her sleek dark head to her *bois-de-rose* silk stockings and bright strapped shoes.

"Yes, dear! Just find me, will you, please, that letter of Lord Culalla's butler? Cowcher—George Cowcher."

Judy Beagham started violently. She gazed at her mother in doubt and surprise.

"About——?" she asked.

"Yes."

Judy shot a quick glance at the two visitors.

"Then these gentlemen——" she began.

"No," replied her mother.

Strickland wondered whether that truncated question was the same one which the bailiff had asked of them in the porch. But Judy Beagham made no further protest. She took a bunch of keys from one of the side drawers of the foolish little writing-table and unlocked a cupboard in the wall of the room. A row of big volumes very like those in Mr. Ricardo's library was exposed to view. Only the backs of these here were lettered A, B, C, D, etc., instead of marked with the dates of years. At the end of the row stood a little index-book.

This Judy Beagham took down and, seating herself, crossed her knees.

"Cowcher?" she asked.

"Cowcher, George," the mother repeated.

Judy opened the book at the letter C and ran a slim finger down the page.

"Page 23," she said, and springing up she replaced the index and took down the big volume entitled C. With this in her arms she resumed her seat. The covers of the book were locked together. Judy chose a tiny key upon her bunch and unlocked them; and in her every movement there was a neatness and an efficiency which took Angus Trevor by storm.

"We keep very little," Mrs. Beagham explained placidly. "All these letters you see scattered here—Judy and I will gather them up and make a great bonfire of them as soon as they have served their turn. It's only the things which might be of importance and value in the future that we keep and classify."

Strickland was struck dumb by the woman's serenity and composure. She sat there in her cotton wrapper and her carpet slippers, describing a business which certainly included blackmail as one of its side-lines, and never turned a hair. He could but stare at her open-mouthed. As for Angus Trevor, his eyes were fixed upon Judy, who sat with the big volume open upon her knee and dismay stark upon her face.

"Mother!" she said in a whisper; and the whisper was so urgent that it drew all the eyes in that room at once upon her.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"It was that they were after. Cowcher's letter. Look!"

She inclined the volume so that all could see. A title to the page written in ink, and underneath the line a bare white page on which shone here and there a spot of viscous fluid. A letter had been gummed upon that bare white page, and the letter was gone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: *Cowcher's Letter*

STRICKLAND'S hopes crashed. Trevor had brought him in a straight line to the very door of the cavern, but others had been before him with the magic word upon their lips. The cavern was empty.

"They?" he cried in a flutter of alarm. "They were after the letter too? Who are they?"

Caroline Beagham could only shake her head distressfully.

"We none of us know. The house was broken into."

"When?" Strickland burst in.

"Two nights ago," said Mrs. Beagham, and Strickland uttered a cry of dismay.

Two nights ago—twenty-four hours, then, before Archie Clutter made his nocturnal call upon Corinne. If he and his rat of a friend were "they"! Why, then, they were moving quickly, appallingly quickly—two days ahead of them.

"We knew nothing about it until the morning," Mrs. Beagham continued, "for no one heard a sound during the night. We should have known nothing about it even then but for Judy. For the windows and the doors were bolted, no object was missing, and only one disarranged—a candle—that one."

Mrs. Beagham pointed to one of those green-shaded candle lamps still in use where no electric light exists.

"It stood upon my little escritoire," she resumed. "Judy is certain that it was left there when we went to bed."

"I blew it out myself," Judy interposed.

"And in the morning it was standing upon the seat of the chair by the escritoire."

Angus Trevor gazed at Judy with reverent eyes.

"Good work," he said, and Judy smiled.

"Yes, Judy's a noticing girl," Caroline Beagham agreed. "We found corroborative evidence afterwards in a couple of sets of footmarks in the mould just outside this window."

"What sort of footmarks?" Strickland once more interposed.

"One set was that of a small man wearing pointed shoes," Judy answered. "The other"—she looked at Strickland's feet—"well, if you had been bigger, you might have made them."

"Good work," Mr. Trevor repeated fervently.

Strickland sat like a man turned to stone. Without a doubt the men who had broken in were Archie Clutter and his friend whom Mr. Ricardo knew as Hospel Rousencq! Somehow—oh, easily enough! through some private servant out of a job and filling in his time by waiting at banquets—they had learnt of this address. But what had they learnt at this address?

Meanwhile Mrs. Beagham continued:

"We said nothing, of course. We don't want the police—drat them!—pushing their long noses into things which don't concern them. The more particularly since we couldn't find anything missing till this blessed minute ——" She broke off with a look of perplexity. "But Judy, dear, that book was locked when you took it down from the cupboard!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," Judy answered; "and I certainly took the keys up to my bedroom on that night and slept with them under my pillow as usual."

She sprang up and went close to the window, where she stood closely scrutinising the lock.

"There are some little scratches, as if a wire had made them," she announced.

"May I see?" Trevor asked eagerly. He actually ran to the window and bent his head close to Judy's the better to examine the book.

"Yes, there's one," he said.

"And there's another," said Judy.

Each of them was pointing and touching the particular scratches each one had identified, so that it was no wonder that their fingers became entangled.

"A wire certainly made that one," said he.

"And the same wire this one," added Judy.

"Yes, I can see it quite well. There's no need to move your hand away. How wonderfully clever of you to have spotted it! It was assuredly a wire."

"There's no doubt that it was a wire," said Judy, and suddenly she laughed, a full-throated quiet laugh with an upward lilt at the end of it; which drove Strickland mad. It was all very well for these two young people to be shamelessly making love to one another in a farm-house window, but, for himself, he was not engaged upon a rural idyll. What he wanted to know was the nature of the letter written by Cowcher, George, the butler to Lord Culalla, which Archie Clutter and his small friend the waiter had carried away with them.

"You will be able to remember the contents of the letter, Mrs. Beagham, I am sure," he pleaded.

Mrs. Beagham shrugged her shoulders.

"I am thinking of the loss of credit to the business if Cowcher, George, gets into trouble," she ruminated dolefully. "It will be put down to carelessness at the best, and treachery at the worst. We may lose some of our clientele"—which she pronounced as though it rhymed with genteel. "As for the letter, since it was important we shall have a copy of it. Judy!"

Judy turned once more to page twenty-three.

"Yes. There's a note here that we have a copy. I'll get it."

"I'll come and help you," said Trevor enthusiastically. "With a business carried on with so much method there would inevitably be a copy."

He went out of the room with Judy and left Caroline

Beagham to deplore the damage which might be done to the good name of her business, and Colonel Strickland to fume and fret over the delay. Archie Clutter had two days' start of him. Archie Clutter had walked into Corinne's little house with this letter written by Cowcher, George, in his pocket. He was wild to learn its contents and there were those two young people actually laughing—he heard them through the door—actually laughing, as if the search for the copying-book were a game of kiss-in-the-ring. Certainly they did take an unconscionable time, and though Judy's hair was still as neat and sleek as ever, she wore a higher colour in her cheeks and her dark eyes sparkled with a brighter lustre when they did return.

"It is here somewhere," she said.

She carried a book into which letters were copied by the old-fashioned method of a press, so that the orthography and the very character of the hand-writing was transferred as faithfully as the words. She laid the book upon a table and, wetting her finger, turned over the flimsy pages until she reached the letter she wanted. She gave a gasp as she scanned it, and all the laughter died out of her face.

"I had forgotten it was as bad as this," she said thoughtfully.

Strickland drew up his chair to the table and sat in front of the open book for a long while. There was no longer any merriment in that room. A grim oppression settled upon it like a cloud. No one spoke, no one dared to stir whilst Strickland sat with that strange document beneath his eyes. For strange it was and a hundred times more startling than anything which Angus Trevor had conjectured. This was no record of a pronouncement about an expected legacy made to a harassing creditor. Had the police known of it, surely Maung H'la would have stood in the dock and Corinne beside him. When Strickland rose at last from the table and released the others in

the room from the spell which his very immobility had laid upon them, he knew by heart every word that he had read. He could see the pages before him and read them out in the air. The whip-hand of Corinne! To be sure, he had it now—or would have had it, if only Archie Clutter had not read those same lines and stolen the original letter just two days before.

For this is what he learnt by heart:

Madam,—You said any news as was interesting. So I take up my pen on this seventeenth day of June, to record a most extrordinary occurence. The significance of it can only be apreciated by one who keeps a close eye upon the date.

On the sixteenth, that is last night as never was, his Lordship had one of his Boheemian parties at Greymark his villa on the River by Kew. There was Lady Ariadne, and Mrs. Trood the artist, and Miss Cranston from the Theatre in the Haymarket and two young ladies from "Polly the Pouncer," at the Monaco, and a number of gentlemen, Horace Prout, James Samper, Charlie Pullinger being prominent, all of them, vivoors about town with a touch of intellec. You know, ma'am, perhaps his Lordship's way. He sets them down and examines them as if they was a class and he was to pass 'em on for a degree, if they answered up to satisfaction. Different from a class too, because they can take their own time about answering and there's all the champagne they can want to help them. Well, they was all answering to the best of their abilities round the supper-table with the windows thrown open on to the lawn and the moon sparkling on the river when Corinne blows in from her cabaret. Very nice she looked, too, in her pale pink frock and etceteras, but flushed and uneasy. They were discussing the affinity of Julius Cæsar to Mussolleni, and very hot they were about it, but every now and then Miss Corinne

would throw in some hysterical remark which she needn't have done—for the ladies were never examined on these points, though they got champagne like the others. Well, when the discussion was at its height, suddenly Miss Corinne she rose up on her feet. "My God!" she said with her eyes starting out of her head. "My God!" like that, and every one stopped talking and looked at her. "She has just died," she cried. "This minute," and she collapsed into her chair and began to moan. I was in the room at the time, serving the caviare, and I helped to get her out on to the lawn, where she came to herself. She had had a vision, so she said, of her friend, Elizabeth Clutter in the Isle of Wight, and had seen her dead. His Lordship didn't harf like the episode, and in a little while Miss Corinne was sorry she had spoken. She was nervous, she said, and her friend was ill and a lot more explanations, and his Lordship didn't like them, either. She put a fair damper on the party, which broke up shortly. Imagine my surprise when I read in the evening paper to-day that Elizabeth Clutter actually had drunk a tumbler of Lysol and killed herself accidentally during the night. Which I say it's curious, ma'am, and open to suspicion. His Lordship hints to me that it's tellypathy and the whole incident should be buried in oblivion. But I ask myself: "Is it so? Or are we treading on the brink of horrors?" No more at present, from

Yours respectfully,
George Cowcher.

Strickland closed the book, but could not shut out from his eyes the scene which the book evoked. The supper room with its windows thrown upon the lawn, and the shining river; Culalla, with his curious metallic voice, throwing his ingenious problems and questions on to the tablecloth and amusing himself by seeing what his guests

could make of them; Corinne, in her smart pink frock, rushing in from the cabaret dances, strung to breaking point by her knowledge of what was to happen that night in the lonely house outside Yarmouth, in the Isle of Wight, by her wonder as to the exact moment when it would happen, or whether it had already happened, or whether the cruel diabolical plot had altogether misfired; and finally, under the torture of her nerves, springing up and screaming out: "She has died this minute!"

What was it that he had overheard Corinne say in the supper room at the "Noughts and Crosses"?

"Culalla won't help. He never comes near me. He is here now, a stranger. He is in the middle of his career. He doesn't want trouble. He doesn't want to miss the boat. He dropped me at once after that evening at Greymark. I don't believe that he has spoken two sentences to me since."

These words, which had so perplexed Strickland at the time they were uttered, were as clear as glass to him now. Probably Ariadne was the only one present at that party who had a doubt afterwards of Corinne's guilt. No wonder Culalla kept aloof! No wonder he enjoined silence upon his butler! But the secret was known to Archie Clutter now—that silent figure with an uplifted arm which could wait patiently until the exact moment came to strike, and then struck once and with annihilating force. What sort of bargain had Archie Clutter driven with Corinne with the argument of Cowcher's letter to assist him?

Strickland sprang to his feet.

"I must get back to London," he said. He handed the book back to Judy and bowed to Mrs. Beagham. "I thank you very much."

Mrs. Beagham was quite anxious that the pair of them should go. Her column, "Heard in Mayfair," should reach the editorial office of *Society Whispers* to-morrow at the latest, and there were a couple of paragraphs to be added to it yet. Judy saw the two men to the door.

"You ought to have a good watch-dog in the house," Trevor said to her with solicitude.

"We are getting one. Meanwhile, the bailiff is sleeping here."

Strickland shook hands with her and marched off down the lane to the car. It was after no more than the most reasonable delay that Angus Trevor joined him. But the hour was seven of the evening and the sun, in a glory of purple and gold, was near to the horizon's edge.

"Let us go," said Strickland, and the car lurched down the lane into the main road and then devoured the miles.

They dined hurriedly at an inn at Daventry. Dusk crept over the country, starlight came and the cool fragrance of flowers baring their breasts to the dew. The two men in the car spoke little to one another. A fever burnt in Strickland's blood, fed by a new anxiety. Had he been wise to leave London behind him and devote the whole day to this expedition? Archie Clutter was moving quickly now to whatever secret end he had in view. It was not likely that he had made of this day a holiday. It was dark when the car purred once more through High Wycombe, and the streets silent. Beyond, the trees on each side of the white road made an endless leafy corridor, always closing together in the far perspective to make an impenetrable forest, always opening out as the great headlights of the car pierced into the depths. Now the loom of London was in the sky ahead; it broadened and strengthened into a cloudy glare as though an unnumbered multitude of men stoked a million furnaces; and then suddenly houses closed about them.

At the corner of Oxford Street Trevor asked that the car should be halted.

"You can drop me here. I want to go to the office."

Some nameless fear made Strickland say:

"If anything has happened during the day, ring me up at Stratton Street, will you?"

"All right."

"Meanwhile a thousand thanks. But for your help, I should have learnt nothing."

Strickland held out his hand in a warmth of gratitude. Trevor took it, and then pleaded:

"But you won't give Carrie Beagham away, will you? It's not a pretty sort of way of making your living, I know. But she trotted out her stuff readily enough, didn't she?"

Strickland nodded.

"I won't betray her."

"Besides," Trevor added, he was standing on the pavement, holding the door of the car open and playing with the handle in an embarrassment, "it would make it awkward for me if you did. For—you see—I mean to go down there again."

Even in the midst of his anxieties, Strickland broke into a laugh.

"I am sure you do," he cried whole-heartedly. "Good luck to you both!"

Strickland drove on to Stratton Street and ordered his car to wait. It was half-past eleven when he opened the door of his flat. His servant came to him whilst he was still in the hall.

"Are there any messages for me?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Lady Ariadne Ferne rang you up a few minutes before midday. I told her ladyship that you were out, and she left a message if you came in, would you please take her to luncheon with Lord Culalla."

Strickland was startled. Lord Culalla, who meant to have nothing more to do with the affair. So, willy nilly, he was being swept back into it.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Her ladyship rang up again, once at five. You were to ring her up the moment you returned."

"I will at once."

But as he went to the machine the servant spoke again:

"Excuse me, sir. But her ladyship rang up again, an hour ago. She said I was to tell you it was too late."

Strickland's face changed as he heard that message. It grew haggard and white. So he had failed Ariadne, after all?

"Did her ladyship seem—troubled?" he asked, in a voice which shook.

"Yes, sir. Her voice sounded very anxious."

So he had failed her! After the long months of preparation for this very minute—preparations begun in the distant jungle of Mogok and continued with watchfulness and thought and loving care—the minute had found him not at his post. He had failed her. He stood for a little while, his wits scattered, his heart aching with remorse and grief as it had never ached before, and his body erect in a sort of catalepsy of his senses.

"Very well, we shall see," he said aloud in a rough harsh voice, so strangely unlike his own that his servant eyed him with concern.

"I'll have a bath now and change. I shall go out again immediately."

"Very well, sir."

The servant went off upon his business, and Strickland wondered with a grim smile whether he, too, as well as Cowcher, George, was a client of Peacock Farm.

Whilst he bathed and changed into his evening clothes, he speculated where he would be most likely to discover Ariadne. He had several invitation cards for that night stuck into the frame of the mirror over his mantelshelf. But they were all invitations to the kind of party which made Ariadne nervous. His servant rang up her house and learnt that she was not there.

"The most likely place will be the 'Noughts and Crosses,'" he argued, "and at all events I shall see Corinne there."

But even that was denied to him. It was nearly half-past twelve when he entered the big room with the crowded

tables and its walls of pigeons' egg blue. Corinne had danced that night at eleven o'clock and had gone from the club the moment her dance was finished. Strickland went from the club, too. He drove to Corinne's house; the windows were dark, the servants in bed, no one answered his ring of the bell. He recalled each favourite resort of Ariadne's, and drew each one blank. He had his invitation cards in his pocket. He visited every one of the big houses in the squares to which he was bidden; and though he lingered for a while in their drawing-rooms and halls, never did he hear her clear voice or see her lovely face lighten with a smile. She was nowhere that night, and as the darkness began to lift Strickland sent his chauffeur with the car to his garage and himself disconsolately started to walk home.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: *The Treasure Hunt*

NOW this last house from which Strickland turned disconsolately away was a great house in South Street, and the house above all houses at which he had hoped to discover Ariadne. He had kept it confidently to the last, since parties given there were gay and broke up late in consequence. He turned to the right on leaving it and walked down John Street into the higher end of Charles Street. His way home lay now to his left, but he had not proceeded farther than twenty paces when a small, closed and brightly-illuminated car flashed past him from the direction of Park Lane, and drew up at the kerb, beneath a lamp-post a hundred yards or so ahead. The door was flung open and two young ladies, with cloaks over their bright evening gowns, sprang out and hurried along the pavement with every appearance of extreme agitation. Both of them carried electric torchs, and far away down the street towards Berkeley Square, now on this side of the roadway, now on that, the lights of the torches flickered and glanced like gigantic glow-worms.

Strickland quickened his pace. The two girls must be searching for the name-plate of a doctor. Some grievous accident or some unexpected crisis of a malady had clearly happened in the neighbourhood. But when he reached the open door of the car and looked into it, he stopped in bewilderment. It was a car of the saloon type and the back seat was heaped high with a quite unaccountable number of maps and books of reference. He saw dictionaries, a *Whittaker's Almanac,* a red book, an abridged encyclopædia, a ready reckoner, and a Post Office Telephone Directory. Whilst he was gazing at these accumulated

springs of popular knowledge, he heard one of the girls cry out joyfully:

"Oh, there's a man by the car! What luck!" and both of them came pattering swiftly back towards him.

"Of course," he said to himself with a sudden illumination. He was assisting at the very first of those "treasure hunts" which were to add a new and rather distinguished gaiety to the rest of that season.

Publicity killed them very quickly. The good tedious killjoys who must be for ever reading lectures to some one, got to work in their snuffy back-drawing-rooms and trounced the young people for the licence of their ways. The writers of paragraphs sneered loftily. No doubt Carrie Beagham, of Peacock Farm, heard quite a deal in Mayfair to their discredit. Too many social aspirants felt that they must be in the thick of the competition, and the hunt became crowded like a day with the Quorn. Finally, the roughs and the loafers got wind of the game and learnt that here at last was ninepence for fourpence, and easily got, too. They had only to watch out for the discovery of a clue by the occupants of a car, and thereafter every car which drove up to the spot was boarded before it had even stopped, the clue was thrust in at the window, and money demanded.

Thus as lively a diversion as a girl's ingenuity ever devised came to an untimely end. Two implements were as necessary to the treasure hunt as a bat to a game of cricket, a quality and a possession, a quick mind and a motorcar. With these, at an hour when the streets had more or less emptied, you forgathered at an appointed rendezvous. There the first clue was to be discovered, and understood. It showed the way to the second, the second to the third, and finally the Treasure, which consisted of a few pence, was reached somewhere in the early morning, and a picnic of a breakfast sent all the hunters joyously home to bed.

Strickland was able to recognise now the first of the

two young ladies who were running towards him for one of Ariadne's friends, by name Phyllis Harmer. She recognised him, too, as he stood under the light from the standard.

"Bobbie, it's Colonel Strickland. We're all right," and as she reached him she thrust a paper into his hand.

"You'll help us, won't you? You see, that's the last clue. We found it by the Albert Hall, and this is the final one. We're a long way the first, and if we can only get it, we shall win the Treasure easily."

All the while she spoke she was glancing up and down the street as anxiously as an outpost who expects a night attack. Strickland read the clue. It was a stanza written in the form of "The Rubáiyát," which Phyllis Harmer had copied on to a slip of paper thus:

> One died a martyr in a king's eclipse,
> Two with a merry jest upon his lips.
> Oh, search, lest Fate's same iron cap puts out
> Your torch nor yet the final secret slips.

Strickland gathered up his intellect in a mighty effort, whilst Phyllis Harmer turned to her companion.

"You'll drive the car round the corner into Berkeley Square, so that if any of the others come along before we're off, they won't get any help from seeing it standing here. This is Bobbie Carthew, Colonel Strickland."

Bobbie Carthew was a tall thin girl with hair of a pale-gold colour. She neither bowed nor smiled, nor expressed any feeling whatever on the occasion of this or indeed any introduction. But she simply drew back both lips and made a rabbit's mouth.

"How do you do?" said Strickland, and then triumphantly turning to Phyllis Harmer, "I've got it," he cried.

Phyllis Harmer stared at him in perplexity for a second.

"What do you mean?" she asked, but her thoughts were with her eyes up the road and down the road, and anywhere but with the stanza.

"Why, these two first lines mean here, Charles Street," he declared pontifically.

Phyllis Harmer danced on the pavement in an ecstasy of impatience.

"But, my dear man, of course they mean Charles Street. That's why we are here."

"And the second two lines," he continued, "refer to one of those iron extinguishers which used to be found outside old houses in other days for link boys to put out their torches. Visualising the street, I remember clearly that there are some still remaining outside the houses at the other end of Charles Street."

Phyllis Harmer was now wringing her hands.

"But of course there are. We've found out the exact extinguisher in which the clue's hidden. We found it out ages ago. But it's terribly high. We have nothing to stand on and we shall tear ourselves to ribbons climbing up to it."

"Oh, I see," cried Strickland. "It's just manual labour, not brain-work you want from me."

Bobbie Carthew made several rabbit's mouths to indicate amusement. She even made a sudden, curiously disconcerting noise, which though it was accompanied with no hint of any expression, must have been intended for a laugh. But it sounded like the whinny of some exceptionally tiny colt.

"That's all! Oh, do come along, Colonel Strickland! I know all the others will come piling on the top of us in a second."

"I'm coming," he said, and Phyllis Harmer turned upon the word, and scampered off down the street like a boy out of school with Strickland at her heels.

"What does the Treasure amount to?" he asked, as he ran.

"One and eightpence in coppers, and I've got to win them."

"You shall if brain and brawn—your brain and my

brawn—can manage it," said Strickland, who was now reduced to his due proportions in this confederacy.

Suddenly, however, a new idea dawned upon him.

"Good Lord!" he cried, and he stopped dead.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" cried Phyllis Harmer. She stamped her feet upon the pavement in her indignation. "You are the most disobliging man I've ever come across. I can't understand why Ariadne adores you."

That last sentence sent a thrill of joy through her assistant. It was the most unfortunate reproach she could have uttered. For it rooted him to the ground.

"Does she?" he exclaimed. "Does she really and truly?"

"Oh! Oh!" Phyllis Harmer moaned, on the verge of tears; and the little car with the girl who made the rabbit's mouths at the wheel flashed past them and disappeared round the corner into Berkeley Square.

"I am coming," said Strickland, and once more they ran on.

"What I mean is," he continued, "is Ariadne out on this hunt?"

"Of course she is. I saw her at the rendezvous. She's behind us somewhere."

"Oh, I ought to have thought of that!" cried Strickland.

Here was the explanation of his night's fruitless quest. No wonder he had not found her in any of the drawing-rooms. He laughed aloud at the fears which had so oppressed him.

"She was driving her car, of course?"

"Yes, the small grey car with the aluminium bonnet."

"And I suppose that"—and he hesitated—"that Julian Ransome was with her."

"Julian Ransome? On this sort of expedition," Phyllis Harmer exclaimed, looking at Strickland as if he was a natural. "Dear man, you've got bats in the belfry."

"I haven't," he replied, but he did not resent the imputation. The rest of Phyllis Harmer's scornful observation

more than made up for it. He chuckled as he ran. Julian Ransome did undoubtedly stand aloof in the more pretentious ways of life. Brilliant in a set speech, he was more than a trifle heavy-handed when he had resumed his seat. Strickland laughed and ran on, and laughed again. Meanwhile Phyllis Harmer stopped, unperceived, and called after him:

"Colonel Strickland! Colonel Strickland! Oh, do grow up just for a minute! This is serious."

Strickland stopped and came penitently back.

"I'll grow up and climb up," said he.

Over the lowest of the stone steps before which Phyllis Harmer had stopped, an iron arch curved high from the iron railings which on each side protected the area. In the middle of this arch a dunce's cap of iron was set so high that only a very tall man with a very long torch could have thrust the end of it into the cavity and extinguished its light.

"The clue's inside. You can see."

She touched the spring of her flashlight and directed it upwards. Strickland could see a slip of white paper clipped to the rim of the extinguisher.

"Yes, I see."

He climbed up on to the railings and, leaning out with one hand grasping the arch, took out the clip and the paper which it held. He jumped down. Already Phyllis Harmer had a pencil and a tablet of paper slips in her hand.

"Hold the torch and read out the clue, whilst I take it down," she commanded.

Strickland obediently read out by the light of the torch the following rigmarole:

If A equals Z, then Z equals A. Then:
Z Z Y L C Y Z G S I L Z W.

"Good," said Phyllis, though what in the world she had to be cheerful about, Strickland could not imagine. A more unlikely row of letters he had never seen in his life.

"Will you please put the clue back in its place, whilst I run round the corner to the car and work this out?"

"Yes, but you mustn't bolt before I join you," cried Strickland. "I want to know what those letters mean too. Promise!"

But Phyllis Harmer was already running as swiftly as her legs would carry her towards Berkeley Square, and his eager remonstrance might have been spoken to the winds. He climbed up again, replaced the clue and its clip, dropped down again on to the pavement and darted round the corner into Berkeley Square. To his relief he saw that the little car with the brightly-illuminated windows was still standing against the kerb. Phyllis Harmer was leaning over the bonnet upon which she held her tablet of paper slips, and her pencil was busily at work.

Beside her a large and benevolent policeman was throwing the light of his dark lantern upon her work; and the engine throbbed and hustled in the silence as though it, too, was sentient and shared with its mistress the excitement of the chase.

"I am getting it," she cried, with a flourish of her pencil as Strickland joined her. She had written down the whole alphabet from A to Z in a column, and then letter to letter parallel with it, the whole alphabet again but reversed, that is from Z to A. She was now interpreting the letters written in the clue.

"A—A . . . B," she said as she wrote. "The officer says that we are the first. . . . L is O, of course, and C is X—that's obvious. Automobile Association box. . . . That's what that means."

She was interchanging the letters in the cryptogram with the corresponding letters in the alphabet written straightforwardly from A to Z.

"A.A. box, Bath Road," she read out. "That's the end."

At one of the sentry boxes of the Automobile Association on the Bath road the invaluable sum of one and eight-

pence in coppers was to be discovered. The big policeman shook his head.

"There'll be a lot of them there boxes, miss, along that there road," he said regretfully.

"Oh, there'll be some indication," Phyllis Harmer replied confidently. "Thank you so much, officer." She pressed a piece of paper which crinkled and crackled in a more promising style than the papers of her writing-pad, and stepped into the car. "You won't give the secret away, officer, will you? Nor you, Colonel Strickland. Not even to Ariadne. Play fair!"

Strickland smiled.

"I think you'll find Ariadne at the A.A. box placidly waiting for you with the one and eightpence in her wrist-bag," he said.

Phyllis Harmer laughed derisively.

"You would," she cried, and Bobbie Carthew made two rabbit's mouths as she stepped on the accelerator. "Off we go!"

But there was one more item of information which Strickland needed.

"I say," he cried out and ran to the door of the car. "Whom was Ariadne with, then? She wasn't alone?"

"No, she had Corinne with her," Phyllis Harmer replied; and her car started forward, circled round the Square and streaked out into Piccadilly. The big policeman announced himself sagely to the sleeping houses:

"What I always says is, when you're young, be young and generous!"

But it was only to the sleeping houses that his wise saying was addressed. For Strickland was already racing back along Charles Street. Phyllis Harmer's last words had taken all the heart and confidence out of him. Archie Clutter had been in secret conference with Corinne the night before—so secret that she had lied to him who had promised to help her. She was now out alone with Ariadne in Ariadne's small car. Phyllis Harmer had not

seen a sign of them since she had left the rendezvous at midnight. What had happened? What might not have happened? He had a picture of Ariadne, somewhere in this dark night crying to him for help. "Too late," she had said over the telephone to his servant. The conventional epitome of failure rang in his ears. Forebodings crowded upon him.

Strickland garaged his cars in Shepherd's Market. He had only to cross the road and run down Queen Street. Immediately opposite to him gaped the archway into the Market. His one idea was to reach the sentry box on the Bath road. If Ariadne had really persisted in this chase, she would have beaten all the Phyllis Harmers in the five continents by hours. She might even now be sitting by the roadside in the glowing dawn, like some beautiful and rather dishevelled princess out of a fairy book.

He knocked up the garage. His small two-seater car was run out into the street and the tank filled with petrol. He buttoned his overcoat across his chest and took his seat at the wheel. He drove back into Charles Street, where now the more belated Treasure Hunters were beginning to arrive. But there was no sign of a low grey car with a long aluminium bonnet, nor did Strickland look for one. If Ariadne was hunting, she was ahead. He drove up Park Lane, down Notting Hill, past Shepherd's Bush, through Gunnersbury into Kew, whilst the last shadows of the night fled and the glory of the morning lay broad over the world. He was reminded of another summer morning very like to this one, and not so many weeks ago when he had driven with Ariadne at his side. Then, too, the blackbirds and the thrushes were piping in the gardens, and all the earth was a quiet place of gold. The memory of that morning was now sweet with promise, now heavy with black omens. She would be waiting by the sentry-box. At any bend of the road he might see her; and he was swung up on silver pinions to the skies. But these good things didn't repeat themselves

exactly; there could not be a second summer morning the exact mould and copy of its forerunner; and down he plumped again to earth. He really needed Phyllis Harmer on the footpaths, to shout "Oh, Colonel Strickland, please grow up for five minutes!" He ran past Hounslow Barracks and a mile farther on a small covered car was drawn up by the side of an A.A. box, and a shout brought him to a standstill.

A coffee-stall, conveyed thither for the occasion, from crackling stove and bubbling tins wafted entrancing odours. In front of it Phyllis Harmer and Bobbie Carthew reclined upon cushions from their car spread out on a stretch of grass. It was Phyllis who had shouted to him. She rattled triumphantly twenty copper pence in a confectioner's paper bag.

"I have won the Treasure!" she cried.

She noticed Strickland's disappointed eyes, and in the flush of her success was disposed to sympathy.

"They will all arrive gradually," she said consolingly. "You had better have some breakfast with us and wait."

They made a meal of eggs and bacon and steaming coffee by the side of the road. As they ate, car after car drove up and discharged a laughing company of young men and women. In a little while, as they sat on wraps and cushions on the turf and breakfasted, they might, but for the sober raiment of the men, have been grouped there to make a picture to grace some luxurious edition of old Boccaccio.

But the low grey car with the aluminium bonnet was not amongst those parked upon the road.

"They must have had trouble with their tyres," said Phyllis Harmer as she saw Strickland's clouded face, and his eyes ranging the road. She rose from the cushions and with her friend got again into her car.

"I shall give them a little time more," he replied. "Good-bye."

The morning had grown from its tender infancy into

its hot youth. Evening gowns could not confront it decently. One by one the Treasure Hunters climbed into their motors and took the London road. At last, besides the keeper of the coffee-stall and the Automobile Association patrol, only Strickland was left. It was clear that Ariadne and Corinne would not come to this spot now. Strickland drove back to the garage and thence walked to Stratton Street. As he let himself into his flat, his servant came forward.

"Mr. Ransome, sir, is waiting to see you."

"Mr. Ransome?"

Strickland looked at the clock on the mantelshelf of the hall. It was even now not yet eight o'clock. A visit from Julian Ransome at an hour so unseasonable promised no good news. Strickland felt all at once utterly weary and dispirited. He sat down upon a chair, and his face went for the moment grey. His servant was thoroughly startled.

"Shall I tell Mr. Ransome, sir, that you can't see him?"

"No," answered Strickland. "I'll see him at once."

He got up with an effort and went forward to his sitting-room.

CHAPTER TWENTY: *The Unopened Letter*

JULIAN RANSOME was seated at the table with Strickland's copy of *The Times* open in front of him. He was very correctly dressed in a black cut-away coat, a high stiff white collar, a dark tie, a double-breasted waistcoat of a light brown colour, and a pair of dark grey trousers with fine stripes.

"Good morning! You wanted to see me?" said Strickland. "I am at your service."

Julian Ransome did not return the greeting. He rose to his feet slowly. His face was pale and sullen, his eyes smouldering. He had all the look of a man constraining himself with difficulty to a civil demeanour.

"Where's Ariadne?" he asked.

Strickland threw out his arms in a gesture of hopelessness.

"So you don't know, either?" he said, and he dropped into a chair.

Ransome laughed harshly and scornfully. Strickland, absorbed in his anxiety, had hardly remarked at all the accusation which had winged Ransome's first question. But the laugh was a different thing. It flouted him for a liar. He pulled himself up erect in his chair.

"Where is she?" Ransome repeated.

"I haven't an idea," Strickland returned coldly. "I have been searching for her all night."

Ransome laughed again, but this time with a note of mockery.

"So I am to believe that, am I?" he asked.

Strickland had now had enough of this kind of examination.

"Good God, man!" he cried out in exasperation. "I don't care a tuppenny damn what you believe."

"Don't you, indeed?"

Julian Ransome mastered himself with an effort.

"Listen to me, please! Ariadne's people are away. Ariadne herself returned home last night after dinner and changed into a tailor-made coat and skirt. She ordered her car to be brought round from the garage. She had her maid pack a small portmanteau and her dressing-case——"

Strickland leaned forward with an exclamation.

"Did she?"

The question provoked Julian Ransome almost beyond endurance. He had not a doubt but that Strickland was play-acting. His face grew dark with blood, but he just managed to keep his passion on the rein.

"Listen to me without interruption, please! Ariadne then had her portmanteau and dressing-case carried down and placed in the little rumble of the car. She left no address; she simply said that she would be away for a few days, that she would write, and that there was nothing to fear. Then she drove away alone."

Ariadne had meant to go away, then. That accounted for her telephone message yesterday. She had made a plan suddenly. But—had she made it? Or had Corinne and Archie Clutter between them worked it out behind the blinds of the lighted room in the South Audley Street house? At the bottom of his mind lay the fear, which he hardly dared acknowledge, that Ariadne held to ransom might—nay, would—earn a fine price for a couple of scoundrels. Crazy? Yes, but it seemed that these crazy things happened in both the hemispheres. He was debating this problem with so complete a concentration that for a few moments he was unaware that Julian Ransome was thundering down upon his head his one question:

"Where is Ariadne?"

For the first time Strickland comprehended the motive

for Ransome's unseasonable visit before eight o'clock in the morning.

"So you hold me to account for her disappearance," he said coldly. "You flatter me by defaming her."

Julian Ransome broke in upon him furiously.

"I don't want to hear any epigrams."

"And I don't care what you want to hear," replied Strickland. "You annoy me."

He got up as he spoke and took off his overcoat. Ransome stepped back with a startled exclamation.

"Good God!" he cried.

For Strickland, now that he had removed his over-coat, was seen to be clothed in an evening dress suit, which had seen a good deal of wear and tear during the course of the night. He was dusty, crumpled, dishevelled and unshorn. His white butterfly tie was twisted up beneath one ear, the stiff front of his shirt was broken, there was a black patch of oil on one of his cuffs. The sight of him was convincing even to so angry a person as Julian Ransome. Strickland could not after all have bolted with Ariadne. She had returned to her home after dinner, changed, and gone decently off with a portmanteau and a dressing-case. Strickland would have done the same. No woman could love him as he was now, in body and clothes fit only for the wash-tub. Besides, here he was back in his own flat—and alone.

"I suppose after all that you have been searching for her," said Ransome in a more moderate voice. He stood for a few moments bewildered. "It never occurred to me but that you and she——" And thereupon he began to utter surprising fragments of sentences. He began reluctantly, but a sense of grievance spurred him on. Once started, he could not stop. A passionate conviction that he had been ill-used made him oblivious even to the humiliation of confessing it.

"Ever since you came back to England there has been nothing but difficulty upon difficulty for me. . . . Oh, I

don't say that you deliberately interfered. No! . . . I should have had a word or two to say to you if you had. . . . It might have been easier for me. No, you didn't deliberately get in my way. But you were there, weren't you? . . . Yes, you were there!"

"I suppose that I had a right to be," Strickland interposed meekly. "I pay my taxes like another."

Julian Ransome rebuked him with dignity.

"I beg you not to be humorous, Colonel Strickland. What I mean, of course, is that you were there always in the background—a sort of stand-by for Ariadne, if you understand me. . . . You didn't criticise her."

"She wouldn't have listened," said Strickland.

"She didn't listen," said Ransome with a touch of resentment. "I know that only too well. And your presence here in London helped her not to listen."

"My eye and Betty Martin," said Strickland rudely.

"Oh, you may jest, but it was so. . . . There was I pretending to play Ariadne's tune, and bit by bit manœuvring and working to change it imperceptibly into mine. . . . I had got to, you see. . . . I've a big career in front of me. . . . There's nothing to be gained by shutting one's eyes to it. A false modesty is the most ruinous, enervating quality. I had got to change Ariadne's tune for the sake of my career. But you weren't trying to change it at all . . . and you were there, as I say. You didn't want to mould her at all, did you?"

"No; I thanked God for her as she was," Strickland agreed.

"Well, I did," Julian Ransome asserted violently. "I wanted"—and a native arrogance, sharpened by disappointment at his obvious failure, carried his tongue to admissions which he would have shrunk from in a moment of greater reserve. "I wanted—it's a brutal phrase, but it's what I mean—to break her in. You didn't! No, you never wanted to—well—to break her in."

"I was never quite so mad as that," said Strickland.

"Well, I was!" Ransome shouted.

He realised that he had used an abominable and foolish phrase. The mere sound of it had been rather shocking. But he was out of his own control. The more unfortunate the phrases he used, the more he persisted in them; the more indefensible, the more he would defend them—yes, and pile others still more extravagant upon them.

"All this fine idea of hers," he exclaimed loftily, "of making some money in a musical comedy first and then stepping aside for me—a fairy tale! It's not my idea, I can tell you."

"No; you belong, Ransome, to the days of Mr. Disraeli," said Strickland. He was very glad to transfer that galling reproach at last to some one else, and unregenerate enough to feel an acute satisfaction that the newly-found relic was the young man in front of him.

"Very good days, too," Julian Ransome retorted. "I meant my wife to be mistress of my house."

"Got a house?" Strickland interposed softly.

"Oh, I shall have a house—don't you trouble your head about that, Colonel Strickland—at all events until the invitations go out from it and your name isn't among them."

Ransome nodded his head with a satisfied grin. He had got well home there. One for his nob. A vulgarism was excusable in thought after so deft a blow.

"I am quite willing to gamble on my future, do you see? Of course you have got to have a future first to gamble on, haven't you? But I have, see! And it's a perfectly sound proposition." And thereupon he uttered the most illuminating sentence. The whole man was compact in it. "I want my wife to owe everything in the world she has, and values, to me."

The idea of a mate—no! The idea of a debtor—yes. His wife must sit in admiration, twiddling her thumbs. Strickland's memories went back to the morning when Ariadne in her sitting-room overlooking the park had cried out: "Ransome's my man!" because he understood

her so well and treated her so wisely. Well, women went wrong in their estimates of men, just as completely as men did in the case of women, and the more high-spirited they were the more joyously confident, the more tremendous the mistakes of which they were the victims. Strickland had been willing on that morning to wave a cheerful farewell to that good barque, *The Gallant Adventure,* when she slipped out past the headlands into the open sea, and to wish it from the depths of his heart favouring breezes throughout its voyage. But he knew now that it was doomed to shipwreck, and upon a reef hardly beyond the horizon's edge.

"Ariadne couldn't owe everything to you," he commented. "Besides, aren't we going a little wide of the point of real importance? Which is, after all: what has become of her?"

Julian Ransome had the grace to feel and show a little confusion. In probing the wounds of his vanity he had forgotten the disappearance of Ariadne. Strickland, indeed, had not yet had a glimpse of the torturing splinter at the core of that wound. But he had no interest in it at all. He was tired and dispirited, and he merely longed for the young politician to take himself and his pretensions out of the room.

"Ariadne set out last night on that treasure hunt. You have heard of it, of course?" he said.

Ransome started.

"Oh, yes! I had heard of it. It took place last night. I had forgotten the date. It wasn't after all the kind of diversion in which I was likely——"

"No, no, of course not," Strickland interrupted hastily. "But Ariadne was certainly at the starting-point, which was Portman Square, at midnight."

"She was!"

"Yes."

Julian Ransome pondered over that fact.

"But she wouldn't want a small portmanteau and a

dressing-case to go on that sort of expedition," he argued.

"She certainly wouldn't," Strickland agreed. "We must assume that she used the treasure hunt as an excuse to slip away unnoticed."

"But why?" Ransome cried, extending his arms in a fine gesture of appeal. "In the name of goodness, why?"

A quite novel explanation began to glimmer in Strickland's mind. He had been shading his eyes with the palm of a hand. He put the hand down and contemplated Julian Ransome with a searching glance.

"Have you been exasperating Ariadne with your theories?" he asked. "It's no use jumping about! You would do better to recognise the truth. You could be quite insupportable, you know. I can hardly think of an excess to which a woman or a man, too, might not be driven."

Julian Ransome laughed with a lofty amusement.

"You are being humorous about me again, I see."

Strickland shook his head.

"These are subjects too solemn for laughter."

Julian paid no heed to the remark. He asked instead the question which Strickland dreaded. For his answer would be certain to prolong the interview by yet another outburst of indignation.

"Was Ariadne alone when you saw her?"

Strickland became a coward and sought escape in equivocations.

"I didn't see her. I wasn't present in Portman Square. I only heard that she was there."

"Did you hear that she was alone?"

"No, I didn't hear that."

"Did you hear that some one was with her?"

"I understood that some one was with her."

"Who?"

Strickland had got no good by his evasions. He had merely aroused suspicions and sharpened anger, and the objectionable name had to be disclosed after all.

"Corinne was with her," said Strickland, and Ransome exploded like a rocket.

"Corinne!" he roared.

"Yes, Corinne," said Strickland meekly.

"So that's it! No wonder you hesitated to tell me! Corinne!"

The name was like a hot wire to an open wound. Julian Ransome flinched from it, yet must grasp it in the end, hurt himself with it and find a luxury of pain in so hurting himself.

"Corinne! To be sure! Corinne! It would be so. Ariadne scampers off with Corinne, openly before all London, and leaves no address. Corinne of the cabarets! Corinne spinning in the air on the shoulders of her dancing partner! Corinne with her brains in her heels! God bless my soul!"

He dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief and turned suddenly upon Strickland, nodding his head savagely.

"You're in the plot of course, Strickland! You and Ariadne and Corinne, you have been putting your heads together over some fine scheme. Oh, I have heard about you. Whilst I was giving my time and my labours to my country. And now they have gone off together, my fiancée and Corinne of the Night Clubs—with you to follow in due season. I do so hope you'll have good weather. Is it Deauville or Aix? Both are charming, I am told, at this time of the year. I regret that my duties keep me in a less amusing place."

Ransome's words were tumbling out of his mouth, jostling and running into one another in a frantic haste to get themselves spoken. There was, indeed, an angle from which his anger might be justified. Strickland began to recognise it. Throughout this affair of Corinne and Archie Clutter, Ransome had been kept in the dark, deliberately by both Strickland and Ariadne. For his own sake, no doubt, not to compromise his position and that

career of which Strickland this morning was hearing a little too much. But Ransome could not be expected to divine this. It was quite gently then that Strickland answered:

"I am not going to repeat that I would give anything to know where Ariadne is at this moment."

Ransome, however, was off upon another tangent.

"Just at this moment," he said, "to go off with Corinne! Was there ever such—such levity—such giddiness? At this moment, on this night of all nights?"

Strickland looked quickly at his wrathful visitor. There was some deeper reason for that wounded pride, some torturing aggravation not yet revealed to him. He asked:

"What happened then last night?"

"You don't know?" cried Ransome, and looked about him with a gasp, as if he requested some one to tell him, if some one could, what the world was coming to.

"No, I don't."

"Read then!"

Ransome twisted *The Times* round and pushed it across the table under Strickland's eyes.

"That column!"

He beat with his knuckles upon a paragraph towards the bottom of the page.

"There! Read there!"

Strickland read. Mr. Julian Ransome, M.P. for the Sittingham Division of Bucks, had been appointed Parliamentary-Secretary to the Board of Trade. Strickland's face grew grave. It was indeed an unfortunate conjunction that this announcement should appear exactly on the morrow of Ariadne's sudden departure. It could not but arouse some comment, even had Ariadne gone off alone.

"She never knew of this," said Strickland. "You may be certain of that. Ariadne never knew."

But the comment, instead of assuaging young Ransome's fury, only kindled it to a more roaring flame.

Strickland had not yet probed to the splinter in the wound, the ultimate cause of all these outcries.

"No, she didn't know," Ransome cried, his voice rising almost to a scream of passion. "But she could have known. She would have known if she had given a thought to me. The news was there for her. Yes, when she came back to change her dress. My chance had come, eh? I had stepped out of the ranks, eh? I had power, I had my share in the best thing there is—the business of governing men——"

Strickland interrupted him sharply:

"Let us leave that alone for the moment. Let me hear exactly how Ariadne might have known."

The pallor of his face was increased. He looked at Ransome with steady, anxious eyes. His voice quietly commanded, and to its authority Ransome yielded as, when Strickland chose to use it, so many had done before.

"I'll give you the information precisely," Ransome answered with a sullen acquiescence. "My appointment was communicated to me by the Prime Minister personally in his room in the House of Commons, at five o'clock in the afternoon. There was a debate in progress of some importance to me in my new position. But I did not at once return to the Chamber. No. I went straight off to the library and wrote a note to Ariadne, giving her the news, and I sent it off there and then by hand." He spoke as if he had done some rather fine and condescending thing in thus employing the first minutes after his elevation to office. "I expected an answer of course. But it didn't come."

"Ariadne was no doubt not at home," Strickland objected.

"That may have been," Julian Ransome conceded handsomely. "But I had a feeling that on an occasion of so much importance to me, she ought to have been at home. I am not saying that I blamed her so much as the condi-

tion of things which made it possible that she shouldn't be at home at such a moment."

"Something of the East about that, isn't there?"

"Well, there's a good deal to be said for the Eastern point of view where women are concerned," Julian retorted, and he resumed his narrative. "When no answer was returned, I said to myself: 'She'll be coming down to Westminster herself. That's it! She'll want to go up into the Ladies' Gallery and see me sitting on the Treasury Bench—making myself at home there—for life—yes, for life. That's what she'll want to do.' I couldn't give my attention to the debate at all, though my Department was concerned. I watched the door instead, for one of the attendants to enter, for a card to be passed down to me from the back benches which I had left now for good. But no card came. I was vexed. It was dinner-time now. Ariadne must have got my note. It was"—he cast about for the word he exactly wanted and found it—"it was neglectful."

So might a Satrap have spoken. Strickland almost looked for a bow-string in Ransome's hand. In the East they knew how to punish such delinquencies and neglects. However, Julian Ransome had not completed the tale of his injuries. The crown of them was to come.

"The House rose soon after eleven. I took a taxi at once and drove to Browden House. Ariadne by that time had changed and gone off again in her car. And she had apparently left no message for me. I saw Ariadne's maid. I assured her that she must be mistaken. She insisted that she was not. I was certain that a note had been left for me. The maid took me upstairs to Ariadne's sitting-room and switched on the light. Even from the doorway I could see the note waiting for me on the blotting-pad. 'I thought so!' I said. After all, I was not quite such an inconsiderable person as the maid thought. 'There it is. There's the message for me'; and I walked over to the

table. 'That letter's not for you, sir,' the maid said. 'It's one which was sent to her ladyship this afternoon.' It was indeed. It was my own letter announcing my appointment and—what do you think?—it was unopened."

"Unopened?" cried Strickland.

He sprang up with a cry.

"Yes," said Julian. "You begin to realise how I have been treated, eh? My letter, if you please, with the great news—just tossed down on the blotting-pad—not worth glancing at. I might have been Mr. Anybody."

"You, for instance," his eyes said, and almost his contemptuous lips. The splinter in the depths of the wound was visible enough now. His letter dispatched in the afternoon was still unread at midnight. Ariadne could come home and dress for dinner. Yes, she had time enough for that! She could return and change again and order her car and have her luggage packed. But she could not spare a moment in which to open the letter, which he had actually interrupted the important business of listening to a debate, in order to write.

"Could anything be more insulting?" Julian Ransome cried.

The affronted gentleman drew some consolation at last from the aspect of his confidant. John Strickland was staring at him aghast. But Strickland's dismay had nothing whatever to do with Ransome's complaints and wounded pride. They were all swept out of his thoughts like so much sea spume driven down the wind.

"Your letter was in your handwriting?" he asked.

"Of course it was."

Strickland nodded. Ariadne would never have left that letter unopened through any indifference or neglect. She was capable of any wild and erratic thing so long as it was not an ill-mannered thing; and this omission fell definitely into that last category. Ariadne was incapable of it. Good manners were of the very substance of her, not a veneer. She would never wound unless she wounded

deliberately; and the last man she would treat with carelessness would be Julian Ransome. The more difficult the relationship of those two became, the more scrupulous she would be to consider him. Since then she had left this letter unopened and unanswered, she must have been in the very press of action, caught by some irresistible demand upon her time and her activity—a demand at all events which would be reckoned irresistible by her, a demand upon her generosity, her friendship. Strickland was staring straight at Julian Ransome, but he was seeing that letter on Ariadne's writing-table, claiming its lecture and its answer. He saw Ariadne moving swiftly in the stress of a crisis, the room darkening, the letter glimmering white. In his fancy it grew incandescent as the darkness gathered. . . .

"Don't you see," he asked quietly, "that there must be another reason? Don't you understand that Corinne must have invented some desperate call for help——?"

But Ransome broke in upon him roughly.

"That won't do at all for me, Colonel Strickland! Corinne this and Corinne that, Corinne here and Corinne there! Corinne might be the League of Nations and Mussolini rolled into one. Damn Corinne, I say. My letter unopened—that's what I am thinking about. If it wasn't opened, because Corinne comes first in importance—well, that only increases the offence. I told you once before that all this Bohemianism of the cabarets had got to end, didn't I? Well, it's going to end now, so far as I am concerned. By God, it is! Corinne! Just fancy!"

He dragged *The Times* across the table towards him and read again the wonderful passage. He was amongst the shining ones on the Treasury Bench. Why, any morning he might wake up to find himself caricatured by Poy or Matz or Struve or one of the other shrewd epitomists of the current politics. Hospel Roussencq had the right phrase for him. He was making the importance, and John Strickland had had as much of it as his stomach

could stand. He rang the bell and when his servant appeared, he said:

"Come right into the room, Soames."

"Very good, sir."

Soames closed the door behind him and stepped forward, whilst Julian Ransome, stayed in the full flight of his eloquence, looked on with annoyance.

"Soames, how long have you been with me?"

"Counting the war, sir, twelve years; and I am sure that I have tried to give satisfaction," answered Soames.

"And I am satisfied," said Strickland. "I shall be still more satisfied if you can remember the name of one Parliamentary-Secretary to the Board of Trade during those twelve years."

Soames's face went perfectly blank. A cardboard mask could not have been more expressionless. He remained mute.

"Take your time, Soames."

Soames swallowed. He prided himself upon his efficiency. He did not deny that it was the part of efficiency to provide his employer with necessary information. He had a sense of failure and humiliation which was extremely galling.

"I am sorry, sir," he said apologetically.

"Not one, Soames?"

"Not one, sir."

Strickland did not look at Julian Ransome, but he was aware that he moved away to the window. Strickland pursued the subject, and in anything but a nice spirit.

"Have you read this morning's paper, Soames?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I make a point of keeping up with the news of the day."

"And you can't mention a single one?"

"No, sir. I am sorry."

"Very well, Soames. That's all."

But it was not all for Soames. He had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. He hesitated at the

door, a very dissatisfied servant; and he came back into the room and made matters ten times worse than they had been before.

"You'll excuse me, sir, and I hope Mr. Ransome will, if I say that Parliamentary gentlemen, valuable of course though they are, don't cut quite as much ice as they used to do. I hope, therefore, you will pardon my ignorance. I am afraid that people have come to look upon the House of Commons as a sort of sick-room—a sick-room in the incurables—where everybody's more and more concerned with the hours of his meals and the doctors' visits and what new nurses are appointed than with the world going by outside the windows. So one gets apt to pay less attention to it than one ought to. I am sorry."

With that catastrophic apology, Soames really retired. Strickland allowed a second or two to elapse, and then said deliberately:

"And Soames, let me tell you, is an unusually well-informed man."

Ransome turned back into the room. He had somehow during the last few minutes acquired a real dignity.

"I don't think that we need prolong this interview," he said quite quietly, as he took up his hat and stick. "Good morning."

He walked to the door and, standing there with his back to the room, made an observation in the same subdued voice which, to Strickland's thinking, gave him in the end all the honours of the encounter.

"I was asking for that, of course," he said. "I have been certainly talking to you foolishly and unguardedly. But I have been deeply troubled, deeply disappointed."

He went out of the room so quietly that he might not have been an under-secretary at all.

Strickland pushed his hair back from his forehead.

"I wasn't behaving nicely," he declared regretfully. "No, I wasn't."

He took a bath, shaved and dressed. He walked to

Browden House. As yet there was no news of Ariadne. There might be, however, something to be learnt in South Audley Street. But the blinds were drawn down behind Corinne's windows, and when Strickland knocked at the door it was opened by the cook. Miss Corinne, he was told, had gone away for some time, and the house was to be shut up. Her maid had already departed on a holiday; she herself, the cook, was leaving that afternoon, and a caretaker was coming in. Strickland walked slowly back to Stratton Street, at a complete loss. There was nothing which he could do, nothing which he had a right to do. He could only wait, whilst the storm cloud of fear massed and darkened above his head.

But upon his hall table a telegram was lying. He tore open the envelope, fumbled with shaking fingers at the folded form, got it spread out at last, and was carried away on so smooth a wave of relief that the whole world seemed on this summer day delectably to have regained its youth. The telegram was from Ariadne.

"Don't worry. Expect a letter in a week. All well," it ran; and more than the words themselves, the name of the place from which it had been sent delighted him.

Ariadne had sent off her telegram from Boulogne at a quarter to twelve. She had crossed to France by the ten o'clock boat, and nowhere else could she be as safe. Strickland stretched himself out in his arm-chair and slept without a movement until dinner-time was long since past and he must make shift with a supper at his club. For a week, then, he walked unharassed, but at the end of the week the expected letter came and—however, let us see what had happened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: *Getting Together*

STRICKLAND had been just as wrong as he could possibly be in the matter of Battchilena's latch-key. Corinne had picked it up from the carpet whilst Ariadne was still in the room and had dropped it into a vase upon her mantelshelf, and there it remained. She had dropped a poor little broken heart at the same time into the same porcelain sarcophagus, and there that remained too.

Corinne was utterly miserable. The dainty playthings who bubble up iridescent and lovely on the froth of a season's fashions fall easy victims to adventurers of the type of Leon Battchilena. Such men can be fatal to them. For so long as the money lasts, they have an effervescent gaiety always at their command, they have no work to occupy their time, no perplexities to make them thoughtful and dull. A telephone call, and they are at your house. They are clever enough to persuade the Corinnes that they could be great artists if only they chose; and meanwhile they have the halo and the prestige without the drudgery.

Battchilena could flatter Corinne by playing to her upon her piano, without a note of music, half of an opera by Strauss, and with an equal sensibility slip into the jingles of the day which she really appreciated and liked. He had passion and jealousy at his beck and call. They were his stock-in-trade. He could make a furious scene and round it off with a reconciliation. If tears were wanted, you could have them from him too. And he was sincere. He was too good a masquerader not to deceive himself. He played upon his own heart-strings as well as upon his mistress's. He was bright if she was cheerful, sympathetic if she was sad, tragic and suicidal if she glanced at another man. All, just as long as the money lasted.

When that was spent, so was passion, and it was time to go.

Such men do not run to courage. Butterflies have wings, not weapons; and at the first chill of fear, at the first thought that he might be held to account for the squandering of Elizabeth Clutter's fortune, he was on the boat train to the Continent. If he left a small heart very troubled and afraid behind him, why, that was Corinne's affair, not his. There was a new little heroine of the films at Berlin whose acquaintance he had yet to make. A young *prima donna* was turning heads crazy in Milan. Battchilena was belated already. He must hurry; and he did.

Meanwhile, Corinne went home alone and cried herself to sleep. "I shan't suffer so very much," she said to herself each day, but she did suffer, and it would have been easier for her if, when her work was over, she had joined some gay party as she had been wont to do. But she was not only love-lorn; she was afraid. Fear was always with her, a snake which now and again tightened its coils about her heart and made her gasp for breath. She dared not any longer let herself at night into a dark and silent house. She must come home betimes to find the windows alight and her servants waiting up for her.

On one night, then, she drove back to South Audley Street at half-past twelve, ate her supper, and was in bed shortly after one o'clock in the morning. She had been sleeping only by fits and starts of late, and she had spent a long, arduous morning rehearsing a new dance. It happened, therefore, that on this night she fell asleep immediately after she had turned off the lamp by the side of her bed.

She awoke with the impression clear in her mind that she had slept for a very long time. But this impression will come from a heavy slumber as often as from a long one; and it was certainly the very dead of the morning. There was not a sound in the streets, and when she raised

her eyelids and found herself lying upon her side with her face towards the windows, she saw that there was not yet any glimmer of dawn. She was still floating on that smooth border-sea between sleep and consciousness, and without moving she closed her eyes again. She would have drifted back at once into oblivion but for a curious sense of discomfort. Even then, in her vague twilight mood, she took a few seconds before she could define it. But when she did she was at once startlingly awake, tingling with every nerve alert to the very tips of her toes. For when she had closed her eyes after assuring herself that it was still dark, she saw beneath each eyelid a dazzling globe of light. She was familiar with that simple phenomenon, of course. But, equally of course, she was familiar with its cause. One saw just such balls of fire for a little while in front of one's eyes when one had looked at the lamp before turning it out—and at no other times.

Now Corinne was convinced that she had slept for a long time. There had, in any case, elapsed too prolonged an interval between this moment of consciousness and the moment when she had last turned out her lamp for its image to remain still impressed upon the retinæ of her eyes. Then some one had but now flashed a light upon her face. Then some one was in the room.

Corinne's blood ran cold as ice. For in the same instant when she became assured that there was an intruder in the room, she knew to an inch where the intruder was. She did not have to move a muscle or to lift an eyelid to acquire the knowledge. Nor did her ears tell her. She heard not a sound, not even an intake of breath. But there was a drag and pressure of the bedclothes across her feet as though they had been tucked in under the mattress very tightly. That could not be the case, for Corinne these days must be lapped in ease, and the ghost of a crumpled roseleaf would have driven rest from her pillow. She could never have fallen asleep with her legs so pin-

ioned. The intruder was seated on the edge of the bed, at the foot of it, and his mere immobility and silence terrified her almost as much as his presence in the room at all.

She pictured him—for she never sought to consol herself with a doubt as to who the intruder was—as a huge giant with a terrible, wasted face, trained to the patience of stone and the swift violence of fire, and he sat on the edge of her bed, his ultimate goal reached after his years of slavery and wandering, waiting—waiting patiently, as he could afford now to wait, with some sinister and devilish humour, until she awoke of her own accord or until he awakened her.

Therefore, of her own accord she must not awake—until some plan of escape shaped itself in her mind, some unexpected help came from some unimagined quarter, or some glint of daybreak slipped into the room and brought noise again into the silent streets. Corinne, though she looked like a flower which a spot of rain would spoil, had a peasant's health and, when put to it, a sturdy spirit. She managed not to move her feet; she managed to modulate her breathing to the easy steadiness of sleep; she managed to keep her body in its attitude of relaxation and to keep unscreamed the scream which ached at the back of her throat. But she could not keep her eyelids closed. She lay in the darkness, with her eyes open towards the windows, her bosom rising and falling evenly, though one small, slim hand was clenched beneath her pillow so tight that the nails bit into her palm, and the sweat was a cold dew upon her forehead and her limbs.

There was a telephone upon the table beside her bed close to the lamp, behind her shoulder. But to reach it she must turn over, stretch out an arm, seize it swiftly —madness! Not a word would be called before it was dashed from her grasp. There was a bell. Its handle dangled from a cord a little above her head. It rang in her maid's room upstairs. That was her best chance.

If she could bring herself to wake naturally, to yawn, to stretch up her arms—but it was putting her life upon the swiftness of a movement; and all the while he—Clutter—was sitting over her, watching her, like a wild beast hunting.

Meanwhile Corinne's eyes got used to the darkness. A summer night, except in a thunderstorm, is never black; and although the blinds were down, the curtains were not drawn and the windows stood open. Every now and again the blinds fluttered and lifted with some passing breath of air.

Gradually, that part of the room within the range of her vision swam vaguely into sight—the oblong shape of the recessed windows, the whiteness of the ceiling, the black sheen of a mirror, a pile of delicate clothes thrown over the back of a chair—all were made discernible to her, not so much by a faint light as by a less dark darkness. Corinne, however, made one error in spite of her magnificent control. She forgot that if she, within these few minutes had learnt to see a little, how very much more must she be visible to the patient watcher on the edge of the bed. She could distinguish a mirror; it hung between its uprights like a gleaming slab of stone. Well, what then of the gleam of her own open eyes?

There was a sudden swoop above her like the body of some great bird descending upon its prey; and a pair of eyes glittering with a greenish lambent fire stared into her own. Corinne's heart turned over inside her breast. The avenger was here then; the moment of retribution so often imagined during these last weeks had come, but in a fashion a thousand times more terrifying than she had ever imagined. Her arm shot up in a frantic clutch towards the bell, but never reached it. The intruder struck with the swiftness of a serpent. One great hand closed about her wrist, a band of metal about a stalk of straw. Her lips made a horrible bubbling sound, and she shuddered down in her bed; but that bubbling sound was not allowed

to swell into a cry. For the palm of the intruder's right hand had covered her mouth. In an extremity of fear, she bit at it like a wounded dog, but she might as usefully have bitten at a piece of iron. The flat of his hand pressed down her lips and kept them sealed, his thumb upon one side and his last two fingers upon the other, held her small face as in a vice, and to add to the final horror, his first and second fingers, crooked, took her nostrils between them and closed. Corinne flung herself from side to side, but she could not loosen by a hair's breadth that relentless grip. It was inconceivable to her that she could suffer torture so poignant and still live. She could not breathe. Her heart thundered against her breast as though it must burst its way out or crack, the blood sang in her ears, her eyes started from their sockets. The darkness whirled about her flecked with blots of fire. Corinne was drowning in her little house in the middle of Mayfair, and with her one free hand she thrashed the bed clothes in her agony.

"So!"

Clutter let her go and she slipped down in the bed, drawing in the air into her lungs with labouring breaths, whilst her body shook from head to foot like a patient in the rigor of a fever.

"It is all very well for Elizabeth Clutter, no doubt," he said in a low voice with a curious rasp to it, "but when one's own turn comes, it is not so pleasant. You will lie very still, Corinne, with your hands stretched at your sides outside the bedclothes."

"Yes," she answered in a whisper.

She obeyed him meekly, and suddenly she began to cry. The tears ran down her cheeks, and the sobs came bursting uncontrollably until her throat ached with them.

"Good!" said Archie Clutter, meaning that he would have no more trouble with her that night. He had chosen his own brute's way to strip from her all resistance in one

or two swift seconds of violence. She lay now a thing of wax for his will to mould as he would. She breathed fear instead of air. Fear slipped in currents of ice through all her veins. She was chained by it to her bed. It gagged her lips.

Clutter reached out his hand and turned on the lamp by the side of the bed. Outside, in South Audley Street, Strickland saw that light shine out and walked on appeased of his anxieties.

For the first time Corinne saw with her own eyes her enemy; and though Battchilena and Strickland had both prepared her by their descriptions, the aspect of the man himself exceeded them by so much that she, who had thought to have plumbed every deep of terror, discovered that there were depths till then unknown. The contrast of his dress lent to him a quality which was bizarre and sinister. For he wore the ordinary dress which a man of fashion puts on in the evening, a high, white collar with its bent flaps, a white tie in a big bow, a white silk scarf about his neck, a black overcoat with silk lapels. But above this conventional garb, were the big naked face of a yellowish pallor, under a thick crop of dark hair. The haggard cheeks, scarred and seamed, the out-thrust full lower lip, the half-open mouth, the green bright eyes of which the fire was for the moment veiled; and visible through all the deformity of thickened features, starved flesh and the stigmas branded by hatred and passion and cruelty, the traces of an erstwhile beauty. Corinne shuddered as she looked. She felt that she was in the presence of some elemental spirit of evil, which had been even before existence was.

Archie Clutter did not trouble to tie up the handle of the bell above her reach, nor to set the telephone receiver down upon the floor. The clasp of his iron fingers about her delicate face had plucked the last least remnant of courage and hardihood out of her.

"To-night you give me my money, Corinne," he said in the queer, creaking voice which just seemed an inevitable part of him.

Corinne whimpered like a child under punishment. She had no money to give.

"The money you hold in trust for me, Corinne."

She dared not plead that the hour was late, that in the morning banks would be open, jewellery could be sold. She was under a compulsion now to speak the truth—even if the truth meant the confession of a crime.

"You give me my money, Corinne, and I forgive you that letter."

Corinne could not assemble her thoughts.

"Letter?" she repeated, her forehead wrinkled in her perplexity, and she saw his eyes widen and the animal leap up in them. "I don't know," she said with a sob.

"The letter asking for money to help me to escape. One morning it lay on the hall table. Then it was destroyed—by you, Corinne. That fine inheritance must not be lost. So, lest another letter come, three nights afterwards Maung H'la shifts the glasses by the bed."

It was a very different story to that which Corinne had told in the garden of the inn upon the Portsmouth road. But she did not contradict this version. She uttered a little moan.

"Maung H'la! Maung H'la."

"Yes, he told me."

"Yet you killed him."

"After he had told me. Of course I did." Archie Clutter's voice rasped the words casually, as though nothing in the world could be more obvious and natural. "I am not the Lord Mayor. I didn't want any trumpeter to warn you that I was coming. Besides Maung H'la couldn't live after I was free."

After all, certain things are done, and certain things are not. There's a code. No, certainly Maung H'la could not go on living after Archie Clutter was free.

"So I want my money, Corinne."

Corinne flung her head from side to side. Almost she gave her throat to him with a prayer—"Let it be quick!"

"Well?" he insisted.

And in a whisper broken by a whimper came the answer at last:

"It is spent."

"What?"

The exclamation was uttered in a low and startled cry. Corinne nodded her head. She had no more words at her command. And Clutter's head dropped so that she could see his face.

"All of it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You and the Spaniard?"

"Yes."

Corinne could not tell how hard she had struck—or what dreams he had nursed of some fair domain in a tropical land, where he would live at his ease, master of his own house. He had escaped from the Ile Royale with his little friend Hospel Roussencq. They had forced their way, starving, weaponless, up the infested rivers, through the infested forests to the inland towns of Venezuela—that desperate pilgrimage so often begun, so seldom accomplished. He had worked his passage to Burma, obtained the facts from Maung H'la, which put Corinne into the palm of his hand. He had dealt with Maung H'la in the very spirit of disdain in which Wotan in the opera had dealt with Hunding. A contemptuous wave of the hand and the rogue had fallen dead. He had come back to England, got together a trifle of money, and made his plan. One thing which through the ten years of his imprisonment and his wanderings he had treasured as his heart's blood was—the latch-key of his house in South Audley Street. He had learnt the lesson of concealment from his fellow-convicts. Now all that ignominy reaped its reward. With the money saved, he could buy the clothes

which passed him without question as a likely visitor. The latch-key passed him as a likely lover. And all these long unlovely labouring days ended, he walks according to plan, into his own house to find that every penny of the fortune that was his had been scattered down the wind. Corinne could not fathom the shock of despair, unutterable despair, which had followed upon the complete ruin of his plans. But his dejection was plain enough, and it relieved her for the moment of that fear, which had chilled her to the marrow of her bones, that she was in the presence of a supernatural agent of evil. As he sat turned to stone, with lowered head, he was human to her now, a human spreading about him some desolating atmosphere of loneliness—like—like the Wandering Jew.

"You and Battchilena," he said.

But the quality of his voice had changed. It was somehow—indefinably—dangerous. His fingers twitched, his hand stretched out a little towards her, and was withdrawn, and stretched out again, hovering. Corinne watched it with a growing horror, as one might watch a poisonous spider of the East. She wrenched her gaze away from it—and he was looking at her, straight in the face, his eyes blazing—a panther crouched for the spring. Just for a second, so surprising had been his abasement, she had been deluded by a sense of victory. But the delusion had gone. She knew that between Corinne living and Corinne dead there was a borderline of no more thickness than a shadow.

"This house?" he asked.

Corinne shook her head.

"Mortgaged."

"You have jewellery?"

Even here she could give him no good news, herself no excuses.

"A few pieces. Most of the valuable things were sold. Oh!" And unable longer to endure the menace of his looks, she raised her hands and pressed them tight over

her face, whilst the tears burst from her afresh. Even to her own ears the tale of her extravagance sounded fatal. Jewellery had been given her—a fortune of it. Jewellery had been bought—oh, with a thriftless hand. But she and Leon had eaten and drunk it, and danced it and gambled it away. If only Battchilena had had money!

"But I will get money for you—I will—— Only let me live! I swear I will!" and she stretched out her arms to him appealingly.

"How?"

"By dancing. I can make money now. I have offers from America," and Clutter swept the prayer away with a growl. As if he would let her out of his reach until one way or another she had paid him.

"You have rich friends," he said at length.

"None who would give me money."

She might have had. With her grace and her sprightliness and her success, she might have had them by the score. But Battchilena with his scenes of jealousy would have prevented her, even if she had wished for them. And she had not wished for them. She had taken a pride in providing for Battchilena herself. What a fool she had been so to let him fill her thoughts when she occupied so small a space in his!

Archie Clutter broke in upon her bitter regrets.

"There's the Australian."

"Lord Culalla?"

"Yes. He's very rich."

"He has not spoken to me for two years, if he could help it."

"Not since the night when you sprang to your feet in his house and cried out 'She has this moment died.'"

Corinne started up and fell back again with a low cry.

"No, no, I didn't mean to move. I was taken by surprise. I didn't think you knew."

"Oh, I knew," he replied, nodding at her savagely.

So he held her really at his mercy. Even if she escaped

him for this night, she was his prisoner. Suspicion had been strong against her. Almost she had been arrested after Elizabeth Clutter's death. If that mad hysterical outcry had been known to the police, she surely would have been—and women went to the scaffold nowadays.

"Culalla must pay for his supper," Archie Clutter continued. "He won't want that story published."

But Corinne knew very well that there was no possibility in that direction. There was no man who would be less likely to endure even a threat of blackmail than Culalla. He was clever, too, and quick. He would get to work upon the instant. Archie Clutter had a weak joint in his armour as well as she.

"Threaten him, through me, through any one," she replied, "he would pursue you . . . he would drive you under . . . you don't know him."

Again Clutter's eyes dropped from her face; and in a low voice he poured out such a string of blasphemous and beastly phrases as made her blood run cold. They were all minted in the convict station of Cayenne, grossly picturesque and abominable and many of them in the slang of the prison so that their meaning was lost upon Corinne. And as the stream flowed, his voice cracked, and his body shook. No horror was to be spared Corinne that night. For she saw that his mind was rocking on its base. The ten years of horror and misery, trebly horrible to the man reared in luxury, and now this crushing disappointment at the end, was it strange if he went mad now, here, in this room where she lay beneath his hands? Once or twice he looked at her with a horrible furtiveness, his lips drawn back, his teeth gleaming, and then dropped his head again and resumed his dreadful monologue, his voice wavering and cracking; and all the time the long fingers worked as though now they caressed and now they crumbled something into fragments. Corinne, watching, suddenly found her wits going, her hold upon her nerves breaking down. She was on the very edge of hysteria.

"Stop!" she whispered piteously. "Stop! Or I must scream! I can't help it! I can't."

Already her voice was rising gustily, the scream was gathering at the back of her throat. In a moment it would be beyond control. With her own hands she plucked at the sheet, covered her lips with it and crushed it into her mouth. In imagination she felt those working fingers once more tightening about her face, choking her, drowning her.

There was just a glimmer of fear in Clutter's eyes too.

"Lie still!" he commanded.

It would be the end of him too if Corinne were to scream and Corinne were to die. The money was gone and with it everything. The time for anger and revenge would come later. Now Corinne must be used.

"You have a great friend in a woman."

"Ariadne!" Corinne looked at her enemy warily. Was Ariadne to be dragged into this whirlpool too? Not if she could help it! Rather anything—even those encircling hands! Her debt to Ariadne's generous championship could not be measured. Corinne was all that Trevor thought her—rapacious, unscrupulous, criminal. But she was on her knees to Ariadne Ferne.

"She has nothing at all," she replied.

"But she has a lover who has much," said Clutter.

"He is not her lover."

Clutter shrugged his shoulders. He was not there to quarrel over terms.

"He would give a great deal if she were in peril."

His whole fortune, as Corinne very well knew, but she was careful not to say one word. She watched Clutter and waited. All her wits were alert now. She must not miss a word.

"You have got some money in the house?" he asked.

Corinne had thirty pounds and some few pieces of jewellery.

"That will do."

He reflected again for a few moments.

"She has a car!"

"Yes."

"And drives it?"

"Yes."

Clutter outlined now his plan. He would need some days to find out the place he wanted. It should not take long. He remembered enough of England, though he had seen little enough of it during this last ten years. There was a great stretch of common land between Esher and Cobham where the road ran between heather. Turn off along a by-road you ran amongst pinewoods, through spaces of empty country. It would be necessary to find some hut, some cottage which was unoccupied, a woodman's hut would do. Corinne must see to it that on a chosen afternoon her friend Ariadne should drive her alone into this wilderness. The rest he and his friend would see to.

Corinne listened. It was just the sort of scheme which a man, separated from the world in a convict station, brooding over his sins, seething with hatred, would invent—at once violent and brutal and childish. Corinne's first thought, "It's impossible! It's crazy!" Her second, "Yet even crazy things are done, if there's audacity to do them." She threw out objections as though she were already a partner in his scheme.

"The next day there would be a hue and cry. . . . Some one would have seen us on the road. . . . There would be a search."

"No, there would be no search."

That same night a warning would be posted into Strickland's letter-box that if he wished to see Ariadne again, he must breathe no word to the police. He must leave his money at a newspaper shop in Soho, say, where letters were received. He must keep no watch upon that shop. It would be known if he did.

"How?" asked Corinne.

"All that day my little friend would sit behind a dingy curtain at a window opposite. Only in the evening when he was sure no watch was being kept, he would send a boy to fetch the package."

Archie Clutter knew the tricks of crime, he had lived amongst convicted criminals so long that he must know them. The money would be brought out of London at once. Ariadne and Corinne could be safe at home that night. It was all crazy—yes—and yet such things had happened, did happen. Ariadne would drive her alone into the pinewood. She had but to plead a headache. There were lonely glades amongst the pinewoods where you might lie hidden for a month. Strickland would pour out his money with both hands for Ariadne at a mere hint of torture. Yes, so far the scheme was mad, yet it was feasible.

"But afterwards," Corinne objected. She had not the whole of his intention yet she imagined. "Afterwards when we were released—what then? You don't think Colonel Strickland would sit quiet and twiddle his thumbs?"

She saw the ghost of a smile flicker about Clutter's lips and vanish. He looked away from her. It seemed that he had suddenly grown shy. Oh, there was more logic in his plan than she had as yet discovered. Now she was sure of it.

"No, but we should have gone."

"He would know where you had hidden. You could be traced."

"We should have crossed the sea."

"Passports?" Corinne suggested.

Archie Clutter grinned.

"Only the innocent are troubled about passports."

"He would follow you to the ends of the earth."

"We should accept that risk."

And at last Corinne knew the black purpose in his mind. The flickering smile had betrayed him. It had returned

to his face, against his will. So he had let it broaden into a grin at the comical idea that men who knew their way about had trouble in securing passports which would let them through the wide meshes of the embarkation ports. But he had not deceived Corinne. His eyes were veiled, his face averted, but he had not kept his secret. Corinne saw a little glade hidden from the sunlight by dark crowded pines and two low mounds of turf side by side. Ariadne and she would be free the moment the money was received. They could both be at their houses that night. Could they? They were to go the same road as Maung H'la. They might lie in their graves undiscovered for a century, or until the builder's pickaxe rang upon their bones.

"Well?" he asked, and swiftly he seized her two wrists and joined them together in his left hand. He stooped forward over her, and his right hand crept forward over the sheet; "Which is it to be, Corinne? Do you help me?"

She stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"Yes," she whispered.

He stooped a little lower.

"Take care, Corinne!" he warned her. "A word to the police and you answer for Elizabeth's death. A word to any one else, and you deal with me, Corinne."

"I—I won't breathe a word," she gasped. "Let me go! Let me go!"

But he shook her hands and laughed quietly to himself. He was amused and his amusement daunted her more than his threats.

"Listen, Corinne. I was a very important person at Cayenne, a person greatly respected, greatly feared. I'll tell you. It'll help you to keep faith with me. Up!"

He dragged her up until his mouth was close to her ear.

"Listen, little Corinne," and his voice cracked as he whispered to her the same amusing secret which Hospel Roussencq had whispered to Mr. Ricardo in the Duke

Street Garden. Each had made a mystery of the foul thing he had to tell, and each in turn had his advantage by so telling it.

Corinne fell back with a moan.

"You? You?" she whispered, her face white as the pillow against which it lay, her lips trembling and a look of horror and repulsion upon her face as though a hooded cobra had reared itself hissing in her path. "Oh!" and her voice died in a wail.

"Yes, I," said Clutter, chuckling. "In two more nights I come—just at this hour. I have my key, Corinne, to my house—I must find no brand-new chain upon the door, Corinne. I'll give you your route. It is understood?"

"Yes."

"Where is your money?"

She told him that it was in a drawer of her dressing-table, between the windows. Her jewels rested in a black leather case in front of the mirror. Archie Clutter rose and looped up the bell out of Corinne's reach.

"Lie still!" he ordered.

"I'll not move," she answered.

Clutter emptied the money out of the drawer into his pocket. In the jewel case a couple of pearl eardrops, a small sunburst of diamonds, a ring set with a large emerald, a string of small pearls, were all that she had left. They followed the money into Clutter's pocket. He returned to the bedside, moving with extraordinary noiselessness and speed, and taking up his hat from a little table close to the door.

"I go now. In two nights from now! Remember! Or I shall have to say to you——" He was at the door when a jest of an exquisite humour came to him. He returned solemnly to the bedside and stood there, towering and immense. He said in a hollow voice, "Corinne, the moment has come to be brave."

These time-honoured words which the French executioner utters when he enters the condemned cell and the

guillotine is set up in the square tickled Archie Clutter's sense of fun all the more because of the secret which he had whispered in her ear. He had been the Deibler, the Monsieur de Paris of the convict station, and from time to time he had had much work upon his hands. As he spoke, he turned out suddenly the light by the bedside with a sudden snap. That, too, appealed to his curious sense of humour, but it was a dangerous trick. For it brought Corinne's heart fluttering into her throat and a cry broke from her like the rattle of the dying.

She neither heard the door close nor a step upon the stair. She could not believe that she was alone—alone and alive. She lay trembling in her bed. Not a sound came to her ears. She dared not move. Then in a panic she sprang up. She felt for the cord of the bell and could not find it. Little whimpering cries broke from her mouth as her hands fumbled against the wall. Something struck against her face, and she screamed now. It was the handle of the bell which had struck her. She seized it and rang and rang and rang again even after she heard the hurried footsteps of her maid running down the stairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: *The Flight*

A FEW minutes afterwards Strickland knocked upon the door. The story told to him was told on the spur of the moment. Corinne was shattered by the terror of the ordeal through which she had just passed, her brain was whirling. She had one clear conviction, and that rather felt than formulated; that there would be no wisdom in any confidence she might make to-night. She might talk wildly and let slip words which must never be spoken. She must have time to bring order and quiet into her distracted mind. So, to give herself that time, she snatched at the first lie which came to hand.

"It was Leon whom you saw," she said. "He has returned."

In the morning, after some hours of fever and restlessness, two resolves were already formed. She drew the telephone receiver close to her and made an appointment with Ariadne.

"I have to rehearse a new dance at ten. I will come round to your house soon after eleven. Will you please wait for me?"

She then took her bath and whilst she dressed, she had a suit-case packed by her maid. For the second of her clear resolutions was that never again would she sleep in that house. Even if she dozed for a second, worn out with fatigue, it would be only to wake up with a scream and see, in fancy or in fact, that great creature of the jungle watching her with lambent eyes from the edge of the bed.

"I shall be away for a night or two," she explained to her maid. "I'll telephone to you in the course of the day."

"Very well, madam," said the maid. "You have some engagements."

"Let me hear them!"

Whilst she pressed her little hat down over her shingled head, the maid read the engagements out—a luncheon at the Semiramis, an appointment at her manicurist, the treasure hunt at night.

"You must ring up after I have gone and put off the luncheon and the manicurist. I shall see Lady Ariadne this morning and I'll tell her myself that I must give up the treasure hunt."

She adjusted her hat and laid some colour on her face and lips, whilst her maid put her handkerchief and her diary, her vanity case and her key into her hand-bag.

"Why, madam"—the maid cried suddenly. She had opened the little drawer at the side of the mirror, where Corinne kept her money—"there were thirty pounds here yesterday. They are gone."

"I know," said Corinne in a confusion. "I wanted them yesterday. I will get some more this morning from the 'Noughts and Crosses,' after my rehearsal. Will you call me up a taxi and put the suit-case into it?"

The maid closed the drawer. It was none of her business, but she knew very well that the money had been in that drawer when Corinne returned home from the club last night. She closed the bag and, carrying the suit-case down the stairs, went out and called a cab to the door. Corinne examined, meanwhile, what she could see of the street from behind the curtain of her window. She did not doubt but that a watch would be established on the house, but she reckoned that she might have an hour or so of grace. It was still not yet ten o'clock and Archie Clutter, who had only secured the necessary money from her during the night, would need a little time to enrol his sentinels. It was very necessary that she should get her suit-case away from the house unseen. She had an excuse to be sure, even if Archie Clutter himself had ques-

tioned her at the door of the cab. She was taking a new dress for her new dance to-night to the 'Noughts and Crosses.' She was going to rehearse in it that morning. She phrased her excuse to hear how it sounded, whilst she watched from behind her curtain, and she doubted whether it would have satisfied her enemy. Happily, however, there was as yet no sign of any surveillance whatever. Corinne ran downstairs and jumped into the cab. She leaned out of the window.

"If any one asks for me, say that I shall be back to-night, if not before. Nothing else."

"Very well, madam," said the maid. She was fairly well used to erratic devices on the part of her young and pretty mistress; and she saved herself a lot of quite unprofitable trouble by not looking underneath her orders for the reasons of them.

"Tell the driver to go to the club."

The maid gave the order. But incurious though she forced herself to be, she could not suppress a passing question as to whence came those bruises upon Corinne's face which showed so pitilessly in the sunlight.

Throughout the journey Corinne kept an eye upon the panel of glass in the back of the cab. Experience had taught her that a boy on a bicycle was chiefly to be suspected. But no boy on a bicycle was following her this morning. However her motto was safety first, and as the commissionaire at the door of the club took her suitcase out of the cab, she said to him:

"You'll be careful of the case, won't you? It's my new dress for this evening."

She had a shilling or two at the bottom of her bag wherewith to pay the cabman, and she followed the commissionaire into the club where her dancing partner was awaiting her. Corinne was an artist. She had the power of cleansing her mind and her thoughts of all her difficulties and troubles, when she was engaged in her art. In the big empty room where the tables were not yet laid,

and instead of an orchestra an accompanist played upon the piano, within five minutes she had lost herself. There must be swiftness without hurry, an appearance of ease with an exactness of accomplishment, steps which wove the daintiest of intricate patterns yet seemed to obey only the inspiration of the moment. Gran, the dancing-partner, was never satisfied. For him however exquisite the thing done, there was always some final imperceptible lacquer of perfection missing. Yet even he at the end of the rehearsal that morning declared: "I think that we ought to have a great success to-night."

"I wonder," said Corinne slowly, as she stood in her dancing-dress with her heels together, and looked curiously about the room. Her thoughts were free again from the preoccupations of the last hour. She was wondering whether she would dance that night at all in that big room —whether she would ever dance again anywhere. But she was at all events to dance there that night.

She drove from the club to Browden House and was taken at once upstairs to that high room whence Ariadne overlooked the Park.

Ariadne was singing over some of her music, but she sprang up on Corinne's appearance.

"We meet at Portman Square at midnight. You know that?" she said. "It's arranged, isn't it?—that you dance to-night at half-past eleven. I'll pick you up at the 'Noughts and Crosses' just before twelve."

"I can't come," said Corinne.

Ariadne looked at her friend with surprise. Then her face changed.

"My dear," she said, as she drew Corinne to the window. With the lightest of fingers she touched those blue marks on either side of the dancer's face. "Oh!" she murmured incredulously. She saw the tears gathering in Corinne's eyes. She settled her in a low chair and herself sat in a window-seat by the side of her.

"What has happened? Tell me!"

And with a few calculated omissions Corinne told the story of her appalling experience, of the crime planned against Ariadne, of her own forced complicity, of the end —Maung H'la's end—which awaited them both, once the ransom was paid over. If Corinne's vocabulary was unequal to the tale, her shaking voice and frightened eyes so filled it out that Ariadne felt that she herself had been in that room all the while, holding her breath, shivering from head to foot. She passed from incredulity to fear as Corinne had done. The plan of a madman—yes. But —but—there were the newspapers. They told of crimes no less audacious—and of disappearances which were never explained—and of men who went to the scaffold—yes! Given men mad with years of misery and a horrible servitude and starvation, and a fury of disappointment to crown it all—who should say? . . .

Ariadne looked out of her window. Beneath her there were men and women going briskly about their business, in the street, beyond the railings across the Park. She saw none of them. She, too, saw a glade amongst the pine-trees and two mounds side by side relaid with turf. She saw her little car hidden in some ravine miles away. She saw men who searched and searched in vain. Just for a moment the horror on her face softened as she saw who led the search. She stood up suddenly.

Suppose Corinne had kept the story to herself! Suppose that in two nights' time, when Clutter came again to visit her, she had made some bargain which would have saved herself! . . . Might that not have been possible? She laid her hand on Corinne's shoulder.

"Thank you, my dear! I shall never forget!" she said gently.

"But the danger's not over," Corinne exclaimed, turning to her imagination. "Don't you see that? Neither for you nor for me. The moment he discovers that I've fled, that I've betrayed him—you haven't seen him, Ariadne—then sooner or later—both of us—yes, both of

us——" and whilst her eyes were fixed upon her friend, her fingers began unconsciously to play over her face, touching lightly the marks of bruises, fitting themselves about her jaws, covering her mouth and lips, until Ariadne could not endure it for another moment.

"Stop, Corinne! At once!" she cried, and with a shiver she crossed the room to the fireplace. "That's horrible," she whispered.

But the position had nevertheless to be faced. There was a wild beast abroad in the land, stalking Corinne, stalking her, that would lash itself into a still more hideous fury, tread with a still softer and more cunning step when it learned that it had been tricked. The wild beast must be caged.

"You must call in the police, Corinne."

Corinne shook her head.

"I can't. Clutter knows that I can't."

"Why not?"

A long pause separated the question from the answer.

"I shall be ruined."

Ariadne was not satisfied. Ruin is a big and a vague word. This was a moment for precision and clear meanings. If Archie Clutter were arrested, no doubt it must be disclosed that Corinne had spent Elizabeth Clutter's fortune.

"And that I spent it with Leon," Corinne added.

Ariadne nodded her head. The revelation would do Corinne harm. But her life was at stake now. Ariadne might protect herself, but Corinne—who could protect her? Besides, people were lenient nowadays, and their memories amazingly short. A season or so abroad—and who would care whether or not she had spent Elizabeth Clutter's fortune with Battchilena, so long as she brought back to London a new dance.

"After all, the money was left to you, Corinne."

Again a long interval followed upon her argument. Then Corinne admitted in a low voice—

"But there's more than that."

Ariadne was more troubled by Corinne's refusal to take the only sort of action useful than she cared to admit even to herself. She had a passion for independence. If she wanted money, she set about making it. If she got netted in troubles, she disentangled herself. She hated asking for help; and if Corinne persisted, it might be that she would have to ask for it. But in that case—she must face a question or two which she had deliberately shirked.

She was standing with a foot upon the fender, her back towards Corinne and her hands resting on the edge of the mantelpiece. There was a mirror in front of her, but she was careful not to look into it. She looked anywhere, indeed, but at Corinne.

"If I am to get hold of any one to help us, I ought to know what you mean when you say there's more than that."

So long as Ariadne had stood alone, she had been content to take her friend on trust. She had been her champion in many a heated discussion. She had no patience with the kind of false friendship which said, "Well, of course, *I* like her," to make it clear that the others didn't and naturally and properly didn't. The little meannesses of life were an abomination to her. But if she were to bring a partner to help, and a partner who would help wholeheartedly, just because of her, Ariadne, and not at all because of Corinne—then she owed it to that partner that he should know just exactly what he was undertaking. Ariadne was clearer upon that point, the more she thought about it.

"Yes, my dear, you must tell me."

Corinne, for her part, looked into the mirror. Ariadne's voice had had no hint of suspicion in it, nor did the reflection of her face show anything but a quiet gravity. But there was a change in the very atmosphere of the room, not so much a chill as a tension. Corinne had a feeling that now at last she was put upon her trial. There were

certain omissions which she had made in her narrative. She had to repair them now, and warily.

"He knows," she said, "that a letter was sent by the Brethren of the Coast in Dutch Guiana asking for money to help him to escape. He would make the most of that if he were arrested."

"But how?"

"To discredit me," said Corinne.

Ariadne thought that explanation over, and could make neither head nor tail of it.

"But the money was sent. Three months before Elizabeth Clutter died. You told us both so. I mean Strickland and myself"—a wave of colour flooded her cheeks as she corrected herself—"in the garden at Ripley."

"I said that I supposed it was sent," Corinne answered quickly.

"Yes. Then there's nothing Clutter could say about that which could hurt you, is there?" Ariadne declared. "Not a thing! On the contrary. For with *your* influence over Elizabeth Clutter, you could no doubt have prevented that money being sent at all."

Was there a tiny note of question in the slow and deliberate statement? Corinne, at all events, fancied she detected one. She glanced in a panic at the mirror over the mantelshelf. Was she to lose her friend now? Then was her case indeed without a glimmer of hope. But Ariadne's head was bent. Corinne could see nothing but her profile, and that gave her no clue.

"Yes, I could," she said in a passionate appeal. "But I didn't! Ariadne, I didn't! I take God to witness!"

In Ariadne's memory there was revived most uncomfortably the ancient rule of grammar that two negatives make an affirmative. Nor was the rule weakened when the two negatives were frantically expressed. Against her will, doubt flowed in upon her and was repelled and flowed in again.

Corinne had to go on now, since she received no acceptance of her appeal.

"He knows, too, of the supper party at Greymark on the night when Elizabeth died."

Ariadne swung swiftly about.

"He knows that? . . . But he can't. . . . We all agreed that it should be forgotten."

"Some one has broken the agreement. For he knows. Sitting on the edge of the bed he told me. Yes! Suppose he was to tell that to a judge, and call you all as witnesses! You can see what that would mean for me."

Ariadne was staring now straight at Corinne.

"Yes, I can," she said in the strangest toneless voice. "Ruin—irretrievable ruin—perhaps"—and Corinne's voice broke and she wrung her hands in fear, not now of the wild beast from the jungle, but of the man in the scarlet gown and the grey wig sitting up high at the seat of judgment—"yes, perhaps even worse."

Here was the true reason why Corinne dared not move openly against Archie Clutter. Ariadne recalled that evening in all its details—the gay party about the table, Culalla at the head of it with his curious habit of holding a class—a question to one, and a question to another, a glass of champagne to quicken your wits and a considered intelligent answer expected—the open windows, and then Corinne flinging in, flushed, hysterical, on wires from her fingers to her pretty feet, and half an hour afterwards springing up with her loud startling cry—"She's dead now. I know it. She's dead now," and the cry ringing out through the windows across the moonlit lawn and glistening river—just at the hour when Elizabeth Clutter actually did die.

Ariadne had always accepted that outburst as an instance of telepathy between Corinne and her sick friend a hundred miles away in the Isle of Wight. But what would a counsel make of it in a court of law? Or a judge? Yes, it would mean ruin—irretrievable ruin and perhaps worse.

Ariadne moved swiftly across the room and sat down again in the window seat; at the side of Corinne but a

little behind her. She stretched out her hand and laid it on her friend's arm.

"My dear," she said, and it was she who now hesitated and appealed. "As far as I am concerned—of course I could never forget that you ran straight along to me with your story—the whole plan to get money out of Strickland through me—so even if——" and she broke off again, though her meaning was clear enough to the one who listened.

"But, you see," she resumed, "if some one else is to help us, I have got to play fair, haven't I? So tell me—the whole truth. Did you know that night at Greymark—what was happening?"

"No!" cried Corinne, and she turned with the protest of one who is grievously wounded. "Ariadne! You couldn't believe it. Of course not."

Her heart sank as Ariadne persisted. She had been a little too dramatic, perhaps, a little too strident.

"You had no sort of arrangement with the Burmese servant?" Ariadne continued in a low but very steady voice. "About changing those glasses?"

"None, none! Ariadne, I swear it! I'd swear it on anything."

Ariadne had not described herself amiss as primitive. Under her iridescent cloak of gaiety she harboured a good many old-fashioned fears and pieties. Lying on a table within reach of her hand was a curious cross of white ivory with a Christ, beautifully carved in amber, stretched upon it, the crown of thorns upon the head, the hands and feet nailed. Ariadne took up the cross and held it out to Corinne.

"On this, then, Corinne!"

Corinne, on the other hand, was pagan to her fingertips. She took the cross without a tremor into her hands. She bowed her head and kissed the feet of the amber Christ.

"I am innocent," she said, in a voice which contrasted

very distinctly with that which she had assumed before. She used a grave and convincing simplicity; and she had her reward.

For Ariadne crossed at once to the telephone and rang up John Strickland. He, as we know, had turned to the left that morning instead of to the right. Ariadne did not reach him, and her failure was something of a shock to her. She had got used to finding him at the end of the telephone when he was wanted. Even in small needs, there he was—with a Rolls Royce, a banking-account and all the necessary equipment of a modern knight-errant. Now when he was most wanted, he suddenly had flown beyond her call. Ariadne was perplexed that such a thing could happen to her; she was also a little hurt with John Strickland, who certainly ought to have known better than to be out of the way when he was needed, and who, poor man, was at that moment prosecuting Ariadne's interests in his own blind way in the company of Angus Trevor.

Ariadne took a minute or two to recover from this set-back. Then she rang up Lord Culalla at many addresses and finally discovered him.

"He won't help me," said Corinne.

None the less, he consented to supply luncheon to the pair of them when Ariadne insisted, and, since the luncheon was to be private, at his own house in Carlton Gardens. Corinne drove to it with Ariadne in more than a little trepidation, but Lord Culalla had exquisite manners with women, whether he had come by them in the back blocks of Australia or acquired them later after his arrival in England. He met Corinne with so easy a courtesy that she found it soon difficult to believe that there had been a break of two years in their acquaintanceship.

He listened to their story in his great library after luncheon, and took the same serious view which they took. Here was a wild animal loose, and Heaven only knew to what swift outrage fury and disappointment might spur him when he found that his prize-birds had flown. At the

same time he agreed with Corinne that if it were possible, the police should not be invoked.

"None of us want the story of that supper-party at my house told to the world," he said. "I think there's a better way."

He took his time to elaborate that better way, partly because he was seriously concerned for the safety of Ariadne, and partly because once Archie Clutter was put upon his trial, some mud must attach to all whose names were involved in the affair. No doubt, too, the position in which he found himself tickled his humour. To play Providence to two of the loveliest girls in London, who sat at his feet in the most exquisite attire and with big wistful eyes implored him to rescue them from their troubles, was to him a very congenial business; and he was not averse to prolonging it.

"Listen, children!" he said. "I have a good many houses, here and there. Kind friends, of whose kindness I keep due and proper account, so that in time they may be paid, go about saying that I have them because I am afraid of a Revolution and wish to have as many burrows as possible against the day when it breaks out. As a matter of fact, I can't resist a house which promises me solitude."

He saw Ariadne and Corinne glance at one another in dismay, and continued with a laugh.

"You're afraid that I have gone off my head. I am telling you the sober truth. I have never had any solitude in my life. I probably should be bored to death after two days of it. But there it is. A dream of mine which comes back and comes back. To get away and sit quietly down and really reach the mentality of Shakespeare and the Bible—just those two books."

For a moment the yearning was upon him now, was audible in his voice, and visible in his eyes, so that Ariadne, who knew him well, saw him suddenly for the first time.

"So when I come across a house just suited to that pur-

pose, I have got to buy it. And of course the first thing that happens when I have bought it, is that you all come down and have supper there, and there's an end of my monastery. But"—and he leaned forward shaking his finger at them—"the perfect house is one neither you nor any of my kind friends know one little thing about."

He rose and fetched an atlas.

"It's in France. You see the advantage of that, Corinne? It's the one country into which a convict escaped from Cayenne dare not follow you, even if, instead of your thirty pounds and your few jewels, he had the Bank of England in his pocket."

"Oh!" said Corinne, clasping her hands together. "You would lend it—just for a time?"

Culalla opened his atlas and placed it on a stool in front of the two girls. He pointed to the Province of Provence.

"There!" he said. "I came upon the house by accident when I was motoring to Cannes. It's just across the river from Avignon, its tiny park runs down to the Rhône. It is perfectly furnished in the Empire style. I bought it just as it stood, lock, stock and barrel, four years ago, and I have slept in it, I think, for a couple of nights."

He added a few details. There were a man and his wife in the lodge at the gates of the park, who would look after them until they secured servants in Avignon. Meanwhile, he himself would stir up all his interests and friends in France to secure that the authorities should move for the extradition of Archie Clutter.

"You see, there wouldn't be a new trial. Evidence of his conviction at Grenoble, his escape and his identification—it wouldn't occupy more than a dozen lines in a newspaper. It would be a formality. As soon as that is done—a few weeks, for I have got influence in France—you can come back."

The two girls accepted his offer with enthusiasm.

"Very well," said Culalla. "Now the essential thing is that you should go at once, and go very secretly."

But Ariadne was the quickest to perceive a way of ful-

filling those conditions. The first treasure hunt was fixed for that night. She would pick up Corinne, as indeed it had already been arranged that she should do, after her dance at the club. She would drive her to the rendezvous in Portman Square. She would keep in the pack of cars for a while, and at the first opportunity she would branch off for the Dover road.

"That's splendid," Culalla exclaimed. He himself was getting excited over this plan of escape. He rang the bell for his butler, and had the Southern Railway Guide brought to him and feverishly looked up the Continental services.

"Yes, you can catch the ten o'clock boat to-morrow morning from Folkestone to Boulogne."

"And Ariadne's car?" Corinne asked.

"Take it with you! Why hurry once you are across? Why not motor to Avignon? In this weather what could you do that is more attractive?"

Ariadne sprang at the idea. It altered the whole spirit of the affair for her. It turned a desperate flight into a lively escapade. The roads of France, its avenues of trees still green, the little towns, the little inns, perhaps a circus at night in the market-place—Ariadne clapped her hands.

"That's the life for me," she cried, and stopped, rather annoyed with herself. For it had suddenly occurred to her that for the full enjoyment of that run, she would have liked yet a third person to bear them company.

Corinne was doubtful upon one point.

"Ariadne can stow her luggage away in her car before she starts from home," she said. "But I am likely to be watched. I packed a suit-case this morning and took it to the club, for I could not sleep in that house again; but if the commissionaire is seen to be putting it into Ariadne's car——"

"Yes, that wouldn't do," Culalla interrupted. He lit a fresh cigar whilst he pondered over that problem. Yes,

if these two girls were seen to be escaping, there would be made a desperate attempt to stop them. Archie Clutter and his kind were bound to have weapons and would use them.

"I've got it," he said in a moment. "You'll have to go home, Corinne, this afternoon. What do you usually do when you are dancing?"

Corinne's face had fallen, but she answered:

"I usually get home at half-past five, rest for a couple of hours, eat a light dinner, and then go on to where I am dancing."

Culalla nodded.

"I am afraid you must do that this afternoon. You'll be quite safe, of course. It will be daylight. Besides, you'll want to arrange with your servants. You had better get them out of the house to-morrow morning. Meanwhile, if you'll give me a note to the secretary or the commissionaire, I'll send up my man to fetch your luggage. Clutter can hardly watch your house and the club and you, too, into the bargain."

Thus, then, it was arranged. Culalla's servant was to fetch Corinne's suit-case, travel by the evening train with it to Folkestone, order them rooms in the hotel on the pier, be on hand when they arrived at three in the morning, put the car on board the steamer, and see them off.

"You have passports, both of you?" he asked.

"Yes," they replied.

"Very well, I'll send a telegram to-morrow morning, as soon as I hear from you at Boulogne, to make sure that the house shall be ready for you," he said. "The Villa Laure, Villeneuve-les-Avignon. That's the address."

And from the Villa Laure at Villeneuve-les-Avignon a letter reached Strickland a week afterwards.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: *Cowcher (George)*

STRICKLAND heard the history of the flight to France later in the day from Lord Culalla, to whom Ariadne commended him. Her letter contained only the briefest epitome. She was more concerned to take up the tale at Boulogne and recount the journey through France, in which her gipsy soul had fairly revelled. Strickland seemed to hear her cry "Ouf!" draw a long breath, and shake a world of boredom off her slim shoulders. The two fugitives had slept the first night at St. Germain-en-Laye, and pushing on betimes the next morning they had taken their breakfast at Fontainebleau in the garden of the famous hotel with the red awnings, in front of the Castle gates. They reached Moulins that evening and found a circus in full blast, a proper circus with broad-backed horses and tissue-paper hoops and sylphs who jumped through them, and a clown—divine! Ariadne lost her heart to him—and a strong man to whom Ariadne would have lost her heart if she had not already lost it to the clown, and a lady in a silk hat and a tailored riding outfit who did the *haute-école* on a brindle steed. On the third day they ran through Roanne and Valence and Orange, and at sunset came to the city of the Popes, with its barrack of a palace frowning on the Rhône. They had slept a night at the Hôtel de l'Europe and recrossing the next morning the long bridge across the river, had driven for two kilometres along the bank to the Villa Laure.

As to the Villa itself, it had no doubt its advantages until this troublesome business was at an end. But there was no village near, consequently no circus, and not even

an *estaminet.* There were no servants to be obtained in the neighbourhood, and, indeed, if there had been, for so short a stay it was hardly worth while seeking to obtain them. Nor did it matter, for the wife of the gardener at the lodge kept the place like a new pin and cooked admirably besides.

"The days will be splendid here. The park is just a huge meadow studded with trees where cattle feed. There is a shrubbery and a garden at the end of the house and a terrace overlooking the Rhône, which flows not a hundred yards away from the windows."

Yes, the days passed easily enough, but Ariadne found the nights overlong. That was clear. The house was built towards the far end of the park. Half a mile separated it from the lodge and the gates; and where Ariadne was bored by the loneliness, Corinne was frightened by it. As soon as darkness came, therefore, they retired upstairs to the private suite of rooms upon the first floor arranged for the owners and locked themselves away from the rest of the empty house until the morning. It was all wonderfully peaceful, of course. The hush of the nights was not so much a negation of sound as an activity of silence. You could hear the cattle cropping the grass far away in the darkness of the park. But—but, Strickland was sure that Ariadne would once more cry "Ouf!" draw a long breath and shake a world of boredom off her shoulders, when the two gentlemen of Cayenne had returned to their normal duties.

Strickland at this point reflected with some amusement that probably Corinne was by now wearing a little thin. As a sparkling firefly, she was exquisite; as a solitary companion, she was likely to fall short of the requirements. He was contented with her, however, for one reason. She was still afraid, and so brought about their early retirement to that upstairs suite. Even so, Strickland disliked intensely the picture which the letter evoked—the two girls barricaded in a corner of an empty house

set in a lonely park. It was a creepy business. Something ought to be done about it. He turned back to the letter, and there in the last few lines was the suggestion that he himself should go and see about it. "What an amazing coincidence!" he said to himself.

"There is no reason why you shouldn't come," she wrote meekly, and Strickland had little difficulty in interpreting that sentence. Julian Ransome had put an end to the ill-assorted arrangement. The *Gallant Adventure* was never, after all, to put out to sea.

"It's all wrong," Strickland said to himself, and tried desperately hard to be sorry. "Twenty-one should marry twenty-nine. However——"

He resumed his perusal of Ariadne's letter; and found those few lines extremely intriguing. The invitation was written in the same meek, almost hesitating, note which was so utterly alien from her ordinary mood. As a rule she would have claimed his presence, probably on a post card, and not greatly bothered her head whether it suited his convenience or not. Now she suggested his coming with a constraint and awkwardness which were familiar to him just because he and she had experienced them once before—on the morning when they had driven down the Portsmouth road to Ripley. Was this shyness in his favour or to his disadvantage? He could not but ask himself that question. Was it a manœuvre in that much-written-about battle between sex and sex? Or was it an old-fashioned lavender-scented notion that what she was willing to give he must not be too crudely prompted to ask? He came to the conclusion that only in Avignon could that question be answered.

Meanwhile he chased Lord Culalla over the telephone from address to address, and ran him to earth in the house at Kew.

"I thought that I might hear from you about this time," said Culalla with a laugh. "Will you come out here and lunch to-day at half-past one?"

"Yes."

Culalla added some instructions as to the route and rang off. Strickland gave an order to his servant to pack a couple of suit-cases. "I shall probably be going off to the South of France."

"You will take me with you, sir?" asked the man.

"I think not, Soames," he said. "Not this time."

He wanted no gossip to follow upon his departure, and his visit to Peacock Farm had quite poisoned his mind. He could not have his coat and hat taken from him by a footman in the hall of any house without wondering whether that man, too, did not assist Caroline Beagham to hear things in Mayfair. He spent the rest of the morning collecting money and letters of credit at his bank, making sure that his passport was in order and copying out at his club a list of trains to the Continent. Then he ran down in his car to Kew, and was disappointed to find a medley of a dozen people beside his host. Culalla came forward.

"I had an opportunity of meeting you for a few moments at the Choral Benevolent Dinner," he said cordially in his ringing metallic voice. "You were very generous to me, I remember. We will talk after luncheon. Meanwhile I have a question I would like to ask you," and he had led the way into the dining-room.

Strickland was to be set an examination paper. He remembered Cowcher (George) writing upon that habit of Culalla's to Caroline Beagham. And his thoughts switched into a speculation as to which of these four men waiting at the table was Cowcher (George). He would like to know him by sight so that he might never engage any one even faintly resembling him. He was not given time, however, to make any close observation. He was seated just one place away from Culalla, and the first course was hardly served when his thesis was set to him.

"You have been in Burma, Colonel Strickland, Ariadne tells me," and somewhere behind him a plate clattered

upon the floor. "That's Cowcher (George)," Strickland said to himself, but his manners forbade him to turn.

"Yes," he answered.

"Then I should like to have your views with reference to the mentality of Europeans in the East who become Buddhist monks."

Strickland looked round at his fellow-guests for help. Every eye was averted from him. They had all passed through the same ordeal and might at any moment be expected to undergo another. It was Strickland's turn, and he must speak up to the best of his ability.

"It's rather a large subject," he murmured.

"It is, indeed. So take your time, Colonel Strickland! Cowcher, some champagne for Colonel Strickland."

At last Strickland saw Caroline's correspondent—a fat, placid, suety man with large smooth cheeks, small eyes and a bald head. He filled Strickland's glass with a steady hand, just as, no doubt, he had filled Corinne's on that night when she had sprung hysterically to her feet and uttered her damnable admission. She may have been sitting on this very chair. The windows stood open then as now. Only the lawn was warm with sunlight and noisy with birds now instead of quiet under the moon, and the river ran flashing in gold instead of shining in silver. Strickland found it a little difficult to concentrate upon his theme, but he happened to know of one case to the point, and so passed his examination with honours.

The rest of that company drifted off when luncheon was over, some to coffee upon the lawn, others upon their various occasions. Strickland was left alone at the table with Culalla, and moved up to his side.

"Yes, we'll have our coffee and cigars here, Cowcher," said Culalla, and as soon as they were alone: "I know that you will be anxious to hear all that I have to tell you about our charming fugitives, Colonel Strickland."

"I heard from Ariadne this morning enough to

inform me how much her friends owe to you, Lord Culalla. But I know no details of their flight."

Culalla supplied them in their order until the story was complete.

"So there the two girls are in the Villa Laure, as safe as canaries in a cage," he said with a smile as he pushed the decanter of liqueur brandy towards his visitor. "But that's not all, of course, that has been done. There's the other side of the affair."

"Archie Clutter," said Strickland.

"Yes, Archie Clutter and his little friend Hospel Roussencq. There were two steps to be taken. First, to persuade the French to apply for their arrest and extradition; then to locate and keep a watch on the men themselves. For the first I set to work through influential friends of mine in Paris, and I can assure you at once that there's no difficulty there. That part of the scheme will go through. Meanwhile I put some watch-dogs of my own on the two gentlemen of Cayenne, who were found to be living at a little foreign restaurant in Soho. Their movements were interesting. The day after Clutter paid his visit to Corinne they bought each a new outfit at a misfit shop in Bedford Street, Strand—clothes, shirts, collars, underclothes, hats, sticks, gloves and suit-cases—the whole equipment of a man going upon his travels and travelling light. The next day, dressed out in their new clothes, they set out to sell Corinne's jewellery. They had some little difficulty over that. But in the end they succeeded. They sold the lot—the emerald ring, the diamond sunburst, ear-rings and all—in a coffee-shop in Hatton Garden, and they got a fair price, considering the suspicious character of the sale. Over two hundred pounds. The night after, Clutter paid his second visit to the house in South Audley Street and found the house locked and empty. Then little Hospel Roussencq trailed you for a day."

"Me?" exclaimed Strickland in surprise.

"Yes. It's clear that they guessed Corinne had given their pretty plan away to Ariadne, and they hoped, no doubt, you would lead them to the place where the two girls had taken cover. Roussencq never lost sight of your movements the whole day."

"What day was that?" Strickland asked curiously.

"Three days ago. To-day's Thursday. It was Monday."

Strickland recalled his doings throughout that day. They had been quite commonplace—his club, a luncheon-party, an afternoon at Ranelagh, then a dinner and a theatre. But it was uncomfortable to know that some one had trod at his heels throughout all those hours and that he had never once suspected it.

"Well?"

"The next day, Tuesday, they lunched together in an Italian restaurant in Frith Street, and sat over their coffee and for a long time afterwards, looking very dejected and talking very earnestly. They must have realised then that the game was up, the Clutter money scattered to the winds, and all their hopes smashed."

Strickland nodded. After a moment of silence he said, sinking down in his chair and puffing out the smoke of his cigar:

"You know, if only Clutter hadn't invented his vile plan of kidnapping Ariadne, I should feel damned sorry for him."

Culalla's face lit up with a smile.

"So should I. He certainly has had the baby to hold all his life, hasn't he? But there it is. He has been turned into a wild beast of the jungle, with all the cunning of a wild beast as well as its ferocity. And when wild beasts come out of the jungle into the towns, they have got to be put into cages, haven't they?"

"Yes," Strickland agreed, but still with a trifle of reluctance.

Lord Culalla leaned forward and touched him on the arm.

"You know, you made the great mistake," he said very quietly. "For yourself, for Ariadne, for Archie Clutter, too. That night behind Mogok, when you had Clutter at the end of your rifle, you should have pulled the trigger."

Strickland sat up and brought his fist down upon the table.

"To whom do you say that?" he cried. "Don't I know it? I have been regretting my folly ever since. But I didn't! No, I didn't! No, I didn't! So Clutter and his friend must go back to Cayenne."

"Yes."

"And as soon as possible. For I gather that the simple life in Provence isn't running very smoothly."

Culalla moved a little uneasily.

"Yes, well, we shan't keep them penned up there for very long," he said.

The confidence had gone from his voice, however. He was not accustomed to rebuffs, even of a temporary kind; still less had he the habit of acknowledging them. He was now therefore in a galling position which he had foreseen and avoided until this moment. Strickland looked at him anxiously.

"I thought you told me the French would act," he said.

"So they will. But Clutter and Roussencq have after all slipped through our fingers."

"What?"

Strickland's cry held so much of consternation that Culalla was quite taken by surprise. He had guessed accurately enough that Strickland loved Ariadne, but there seemed to him to be no reason for so great a pother in this set-back. After all, it only meant delay.

"We shall pick them up again pretty quickly, never fear, Colonel Strickland," he said in soothing tones. "We only lost touch with them yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes."

"In the morning?"

"To be precise, the last time Clutter was seen was at half-past eleven. He was lost in the great stores in Oxford Street. You know what a crowd there is thronging the aisles at that hour. Hospel Roussencq got away about the same time in the tube station at Piccadilly Circus."

"They had planned, then, to get away from you?"

Strickland was not looking at his host. His eyes, indeed, were ranging over the tablecloth, held for a second by this or that trivial article, a glittering fork, a glass which caught the light. When he spoke his voice was quite toneless. But his very manner of indifference conveyed to Culalla an impression of acute distress more clearly than a torrent of words.

"Yes. They had discovered they were under surveillance. So they made a bolt for some other burrow. I haven't a doubt of it."

"I wish I hadn't," said Strickland.

For a week he had been going about with a mind at ease in a smiling world. Now a pit black with menaces and horrors was opening at his feet. He edged his chair a little closer to Culalla's and lowered his voice.

"Which of your servants was it," he asked, "who collected Corinne's suit-case at the 'Noughts and Crosses' Club on the morning after Archie Clutter's visit?"

Culalla, without any premeditation, lowered his voice to the pitch of Strickland's.

"Cowcher," he answered.

"Was it Cowcher, too, who took that luggage to Folkestone, met the two girls at three in the morning at the door of the hotel, put the motor-car on board the steamer, and saw the travellers off?"

"Yes."

Culalla's surprise at the questions turned into anxiety.

"Why," he added, "Cowcher's invaluable in that kind of work."

"No doubt," said Strickland in the same even voice. "Did he know, too, to what place the ladies were travelling?"

"Let me think for a moment;" and after a moment: "Yes, he knew. I sent him to the post office with a telegram addressed to the lodge-keeper at the Villa Laure."

"Exactly," said Strickland.

He ran a finger vaguely backwards and forwards along the edge of the tablecloth, and then he asked a final question, so unexpected that Culalla wondered for a second whether his visitor had gone mad.

"Did you know that his Christian name was George? Cowcher"—and he traced a couple of brackets with his fingers on the cloth—"(George)?"

"No, upon my soul, I didn't know that," cried Culalla, and at that moment he learned that Strickland was not indeed mad or hovering. For Strickland raised his face for the first time since he had begun to ask questions. It was as white as the tablecloth with which he had been playing and his eyes were heavy with pain. He took out his watch and consulted the dial.

"I'll tell you where Clutter and Roussencq are at this minute of time. It is five minutes past three. They are in a Rapide which is slowing down as it approaches Lyons."

Culalla stared open-mouthed at his visitor. Not for years had he been so disconcerted. His head was in a whirl. He had been so confident in dispatching those two fugitives to his retreat in Provence. He had been so pleased that Ariadne's beauty should grace it for a little while and leave perhaps some fragrance of her to linger in the rooms. He had been so sure that she would be happy there, all the more sure because it was only a house in a dream to him, that house which each man selects as

his heart's desire, so long as he never puts his heart's desire to the test and proceeds actually to dwell in it. Now Strickland was telling him in so many words that he had sent Ariadne running towards a trap. And Cowcher! The invaluable Cowcher! How could he, the composite portrait of all the butlers who ever were, be the colleague of convicts and assassins?

"It's impossible!" he said, keeping still to that low voice which Strickland's example prescribed. "Cowcher isn't the man to stand in with Archie Clutter."

"I agree," said Strickland grimly. "Stand in? No, Archie Clutter would see to that. But——"

He broke off, and, pointing to a bell-button set in enamel which stood on the table at Lord Culalla's elbow, he dropped his voice still lower.

"Where does that bell ring?"

"In the butler's pantry," Lord Culalla whispered back.

"Near this room?"

"No, at the other end of the house."

"Good! We will see now. Will you be good enough to ring that bell and tell Cowcher, when he comes, to bring me a glass of water."

Culalla rang the bell at once. Strickland raised a forefinger for silence and both men strained their ears to listen.

But the bell was not answered at all.

"You see?" continued Strickland. "Cowcher never heard that bell ring in his pantry on the other side of the house, because he's standing in mortal terror outside this door here with his ear to the panel to overhear us. I must tell you about Cowcher (George)."

Strickland could no longer respect the credit of Caroline Beagham, or even the happiness of Judy. He could not keep his promise to Angus Trevor. Life and death were in the balance now. Ariadne was in peril. The two wild beasts of the jungle were hunting. What might not happen in the Villa Laure set apart in its sequestered park? He told to Lord Culalla in a low voice the story of his

visit to Peacock Farm, of the theft of Cowcher's letter, of its contents as revealed in the copy.

"There's little doubt in my mind that Clutter and Roussencq were the thieves. The footprints they left in the mould under the window bear me out. Serving as waiters, they were certain to come across some discharged private servants who were clients of Caroline Beagham. No doubt Archie Clutter knew that Corinne supped with you on the night when Elizabeth Clutter died. It was worth while spending a night in finding out whether Cowcher sent any details of that supper-party—worth while to any one, but especially worth while to the man who had worked his passage across half the world to come up with Maung H'la at the ruby mines. And if Cowcher had, why Cowcher belonged to them."

"That's true," Culalla agreed. "But—Cowcher!" and in exasperation he rang the bell again, and yet a third time.

Both men were listening, even holding their breath that they might listen the better. They heard an urgent whispering in the corridor outside the door. Some one had come from the servant's quarters to warn Cowcher that he was wanted. A pause followed, then came a distant cough (Cowcher's) needlessly loud, and a heavy tread (Cowcher's) needlessly heavy. In stratagems Cowcher (George) would hardly have passed the children's standard. He entered the room sedately.

"You rang, my lord?"

"Yes. Will you please give Colonel Strickland a glass of water!"

"Certainly, my lord."

Cowcher took a salver from the sideboard in his left hand and placed upon it a tumbler. In his right hand he took a beautiful glass jug with a glint of grey lead in its composition. Strickland took the tumbler from the salver. Cowcher filled it from the jug.

"I rang for you more than once, Cowcher," suddenly

said Lord Culalla in his most brisk and metallic voice.

"I very much regret it, my lord," said Cowcher. "I was not at the moment within hearing of the bell."

"That, indeed, seems to be indicated," said his lordship pleasantly.

Cowcher looked about the table. He could see nothing now missing which gentlemen usually require at this hour.

"Do you require me any more, my lord?"

"Yes," said Lord Cullalla. He looked at the jug which Cowcher was still holding. "That glass is Waterford, Cowcher. I think you had better put it safely down upon the table before I go on. You might otherwise drop it."

Cowcher's face was not one of those which reward the student of human nature with lucid expressions of emotions. But even behind the screen of that thick, pale flesh, a stir of uneasiness was visible now. His little eyes were anxious. He seemed to be saying to himself, "This is not a promising beginning. No! Nobody in the world could say that." He stepped forward and placed the Waterford jug upon the table.

"Yes, my lord."

His lordship was brutally direct, knowing his man.

"You wrote an account of an event which took place in this room to a Mrs. Caroline Beagham and you were paid for it."

"I did, my lord?" Cowcher stammered.

"Yes. That letter was stolen. What communication have you had during the last three days with the man who stole it?"

There were certain openings for Cowcher. He might, for instance, have flatly denied that he had ever sent a letter to Mrs. Beagham. Since he was certain to be dismissed he might even have said, "Go to Hell!" He might possibly have gone a step farther and inquired politely of his lordship, whether his lordship would like a picturesque narrative of the event in question to appear in the press. But all these expedients stipulated some combative element

in the character of the man, and Cowcher (George) was no fighter. He shook and stammered, and then did what, to Strickland at all events, was a disgusting thing. He cried. Two great tears plumped on to his fat cheeks. They were followed by others. Cowcher suddenly dropped upon his knees, clasped his hands and extended them appealingly to his master. Nothing is more curious to note than how often the derided stock gestures of melodrama acutally repeat themselves in the scenes of real distress. Cowcher had not a thought of acting. His cheeks shook and, sobbing and swallowing, he poured out his confession. He 'adn't meant any 'arm, my lord! . . . Yes, he 'ad written a letter . . . he would willingly bite out his tongue, if he could 'ave that letter back unposted. But temptation came in Cowcher's way. Ah, temptation! What a terrible thing, my lord, for poor people—— All this morning he had felt something brooding over the 'ouse, he 'ad, my lord.

Culalla was the last man to whom such sentimental pleas would appeal.

"Cut that out!" he said, and his words were like the clang of iron upon iron. "Come to the point!"

Cowcher admitted that a man had written to him saying that he was in possession of the letter.

"Name?" asked Culalla.

"He signed himself 'John the Hangman,'" said Cowcher lamentably.

"When did you get the letter?"

"I received it by the first post, yesterday, my lord."

Culalla looked across the corner of the table to Colonel Strickland.

"Written after their long confabulation in the Italian restaurant on the Tuesday afternoon," he said, and he turned back to the kneeling Cowcher.

"What did 'John the Hangman' say?"

"I was told to meet him at a certain place, my lord, at eleven-thirty that morning."

"And you did?"

"Yes, my lord. I waited ten minutes and he came."

"Describe him!"

Cowcher, for the purposes of his correspondence with Caroline Beagham had acquired observation and a rough capacity to express what he saw. He left no doubt in the minds of his auditors that John the Hangman was Archie Clutter. "John the Hangman" in addition, was the name which Archie Clutter would have chosen. It was alarming and it suited his particular form of humour.

"Where did you meet him?" Culalla rasped out.

"My lord, in the Chapel of Rest on the Bayswater Road."

"What!"

Culalla was suddenly provoked out of his sledge-hammer calm into violence. He glared at Cowcher savagely. To Strickland, who was quite at a loss to understand why so small a detail as the actual meeting-place should so affect him, he appeared a man shocked and outraged. But Culalla was a curious blend of a man. In and out amongst those practical activities which had amassed for him millions, iridescent threads were always weaving him dreams. There was a side of him which was quite contemplative, and it had made him acquainted with the unobtrusive little red chapel, which stands back at the end of a stone-flagged path so near to the roar of the Marble Arch. He had turned aside from the hot turmoil of the day into that place of quietude, often and often; and sitting in one of its tiny pews had looked upon its painted walls, and bathed his soul for a little while in a pool of shadows and peace. Now these two men had defiled it for him, so that it would be a closed door always in the future. For he would see there always Archie Clutter and his butler, the wild beast and the craven, preparing harm and setting evil afoot.

"What did you tell him?" Lord Culalla asked.

"He threatened me, my lord. He would send you a copy of the letter——"

"What did you tell him? Answer!"

Cowcher's tears rained down his face.

"I told him where the young ladies had gone."

"Avignon?" Strickland interrupted with just a gleam of hope that the butler's betrayals had stopped there.

"No, sir. The Villa Laure a few kilometres from Avignon."

Strickland leaned back in his chair with an exclamation of disgust. Whatever harm to those two girls Cowcher could do in his cowardice, he had done. Culalla, however, had still a question for him.

"I want to get a little more light on the mentality of this man Clutter, if I can," he said. "Did he let you go thus, Cowcher?"

"No, my lord! He didn't exactly let me go. But he was sort of took, like a man who 'as 'ad a stroke." All Cowcher's carefully treasured aspirates had gone by the board. He could not carry that luxury-cargo on this voyage of affliction. His native accent winged his words. "He sat there and never moved muscle or limb, except twicst when 'e shivered tremendously. It was somethink orful to see 'im. Once I spoke to 'im, said, 'Now I must be getting along,' or words like that. But 'e didn't 'ear—'e didn't even see me go. I left 'im there, a broken man."

Cowcher was making the most of Archie Clutter's disappointment. He had almost a conviction that he himself had dealt the fellow unconsciously a stunning blow. In a little while he would probaby have felt injured by the treatment of his employer. Lord Culalla, however, did not give him that little while.

"Get up! Pack! Go!" he said. "You must be out of the house in an hour."

The tone of the metallic voice was final. Cowcher rose from his knees and sniffed his way out of the dining-room without another word. He went out of the thoughts of

the two men he left there at the same time. They looked at one another in consternation. Culalla was the first to break the silence.

"I am humiliated beyond words," he said in contrition. "I thought that I was doing so clever a thing." He caught suddenly at an argument. "But we mustn't forget, my dear fellow"—and to point the hopeful consideration, he hitched his chair forward—"no, we mustn't forget that, although it's very likely those two men, their minds unbalanced and all their dreams of wealth and ease at an end, might risk everything on a rush through France with the chance of a profit after all, and the certainty of a revenge at the end of their journey, they would still have to have passports."

Strickland laughed harshly.

"So Corinne said. She seemed to amuse Archie Clutter by saying it. Didn't she tell you his answer? Archie understood that innocent people going upon their holidays did have some difficulty over passports, but not people like himself and his little friend. And, by God, he was right, too," Strickland flashed out with a thump of his fist upon the table. "Every crook who wants to swindle you with a non-existent oil share, every propagandist from Moscow who wants to make a little more dirt in Glasgow—oh, yes, they can slip in and out, and the Government's quite pained if a Member of Parliament asks a question about it. But you and I, and the Smiths of Surbiton when we want to go abroad, we have to go on our knees to our own servants at the Passport Office, and tell them actually why we want to go abroad, before we are condescendingly granted permission. The damned impertinence of it!"

He recovered control of himself with a jerk and, rising abruptly from his chair, went over to the window. Tonight the Rhône would be flowing past the park of the Villa Laure, just as the Thames would be flowing here and was flowing on that fatal night when Corinne sprang to her feet in this room—eddies of molten silver and

ripples of gold and the music of running water. Would those two men be stealing across the park? They would reach Avignon at half-past seven, if the train ran true. He sent up a prayer as he stood in the window looking out upon the trim lawn. Fortunately the nights were short—about midnight the moon would rise. Evening would shade through silver to the dawn. There would be no real darkness. It was the bad season for the wild beasts. He fell to calculating times and distances. As he calculated the cloud lifted a little from his face. He spoke to Culalla in the room behind him without turning his head; working out his problem slowly.

"I was wrong in thinking Clutter would reach Avignon to-night. Let us say that he left the Chapel of Rest at midday yesterday, midday at the earliest. He would go thence to some secret rendezvous where he would meet Hospel Roussencq. They would lunch together and they would not lunch quickly. Remember that they had had a knock-down blow! That's clear enough from Cowcher's description of the Archie Clutter he left sitting in the Chapel of Rest, a giant in granite, his ears shut to sounds, who once or twice shivered. He had expected to hear that Ariadne and Corinne were somewhere in London, or in England at all events. No, they were in France. No wonder Clutter shivered. He and Roussencq would have to take stock of their money, to talk over new plans, to decide upon one of them. I can see this desperate idea of a swift rush to France, a pounce upon their victims, creeping into their talk, always rejected, always returning. Many a Frenchman in the same case has slunk back into France and died there an old man at liberty. Instances would be quoted. In the end—for there's no alternative—they accept the risk. They'll go. Yes, but they wouldn't travel by a night service. Too few passengers. They must travel when the passenger traffic is at its busiest, the decks of the steamers black and passports stamped without a glance."

"By the one o'clock boat then from Dover to Calais," Culalla interposed. "Yes, I think that's probable."

"I think it's certain," continued Strickland. "Clutter has shown a queer patience all through, hasn't he? That's what makes him so formidable. He knows how to keep the fires of his hatred banked. He left Dover by the boat—this morning. He may be at Amiens at this moment. He will be in Paris to-night, at Avignon to-morrow morning. He has on paper the advantage of twenty-four hours over me. But in fact he has none. For I shall travel by aeroplane and reach Avignon to-morrow morning too."

Culalla drew a breath of relief. He had never really doubted that Strickland would go, but he derived none the less some comfort from hearing him say so.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: *Two Points of View*

IT was after five o'clock in the afternoon when Strickland left Culalla's house at Kew. He drove at once to the offices of the Air Company and hired an aeroplane to Avignon. Thence he went to a telegraph office and dispatched a telegram to Lady Ariadne Ferne at the Villa Laure, in the following terms.

Please move with Corinne on receipt of this telegram to the hotel at Avignon. Most serious and urgent. Wait there until I come. John Strickland.

It was a quarter past six when he pushed this telegram under the bars of the counter. It was impossible, therefore, that it could be delivered that night at a house some kilometres from the postal town in the south of Provence. But Strickland was not really troubled by the delay. The despatch of the telegram was a mere precaution. The more he reasoned about it, the more certain he became that Archie Clutter and his accomplice would have travelled by the crowded midday service, when all was turmoil, and supervision a form. Archie Clutter coupled his ferocity with cunning. He took big chances, but not small ones. He would reach Avignon to-morrow morning, and so would this telegram reach the Villa Laure even if Strickland himself did not. Clutter would have to explore with caution the neighbourhood of the Villa, he would have to make his arrangements—for Ariadne's reception, for instance. He and his companion would probably go on to Marseilles at once. Clutter would

have no reason to suspect that Cowcher had revealed his share in the matter. He would take his time as he had taken it in London, and in Burma, so that when he struck, the blow should not glance. Strickland probably had two or three days to spare; and meanwhile Culalla would pull his strings in Paris. There would be a certain amount of inquiry there before any active steps were taken. That was inevitable. But on the whole, Strickland started from the Croydon Aerodrome that night with a mind fairly free from apprehension.

But a little to the north of Paris, the aeroplane was in trouble and forced to land. Strickland caught an early suburban train into Paris and, driving across the city, left at nine o'clock in the morning by the Rapide to Marseilles.

In after days he had very few recollections of that journey to the South. A green wood with the sunlight splashing on the leaves, a throng of church steeples like a squadron of lancers, a spacious city of bridges and broad rivers. But such impressions were no more than reflections in a mirror which vanish altogether with the objects reflected. He was lulled into a trance by the roar of the train across the vast, flat country and the regular thud and throb of the springs beneath the carriage. An old image, which had once occurred to him, of the affair in which he had taken so great a part recurred to him now. He was a man at a capstan winding in the last links of a chain of events which had begun many months ago for him with a premonition as he sat on the veranda of the guest home at Mogok under a procession of blazing stars. It was written that whatever finish there was to be, he should be in it. Even that day's journey into Warwickshire, for which he had so bitterly reproached himself, was now seen to be no waste of a day at all. It fitted into the pattern at its proper place. He would arrive in time. He would find the two girls safe at the Hôtel de l'Europe in the town. Meanwhile his train was late; by half an hour at Dijon; by an hour at Valence.

That morning Corinne had risen early. Strickland had drawn the right inference from Ariadne's letter. There is no greater test to which friendship can be put than the test of isolation. The little differences of temperament and point of view and conduct become more and more noticeable, more and more irritating. People drawn to one another in a company fly apart in a solitude, unless each one brings enough imagination to recognise and find a value in the very points of difference. The friendship between Ariadne and Corinne within the week was already wearing thin. It had been a growth, bred from chivalry upon the one side and gratitude upon the other, of admiration on Ariadne's part for the exquisite grace of Corinne's dancing, of pride on Corinne's that she was numbered amongst Ariadne's friends. It had flowered in the hot-house atmosphere of supper parties and dancing clubs; it flourished to the popping of corks and the clatter of voices, but it languished quickly during the long evenings at the Villa Laure. What was the whole plain flat surface of Corinne's mind was just one of many facets of Ariadne's. Corinne was bored stiff, to use her expression. Ariadne found in Avignon, its narrow streets opening into little open squares, its history, its surrounding and its people, matter to enchant her. But they had no common experiences to talk over and get their fun out of in the evening. So Ariadne fell to rehearsing her songs with the help of a piano in the boudoir of their suite; whilst in Corinne's thoughts there was framed that unforgiving, resentful word, "amateur." How much vanity is assuaged in the course of a year by the triumphant use of that damning word!

When Strickland was ascending from the Croydon Aerodrome on the Thursday night, Ariadne rose from her piano.

"I would like to make an excursion to-morrow to Les Baux, Corinne," she said.

"What in the world's that?" asked Corinne.

"The Castle of the Troubadours. It's a wonderful drive, I believe, and a place of wonderful ruins on the top of a hill when you reach it."

Ruins upon the top of a hill meant worse than nothing to Corinne.

"We could take our luncheon—it's a good long way—and picnic on the road," Ariadne urged.

Corinne lit a cigarette. A railway time-table, which she had been diligently consulting, lay on the sofa beside her.

"I have got an idea," she said. "You go to Les Baux. I shouldn't appreciate it a bit. But I see that the *Moldavia* puts into Marseilles to-morrow morning, and I believe I have some friends on board. I'll ring up the hotel at Avignon for a motor to come out for me, and I'll catch the early train."

Ariadne agreed without hesitation. A day apart would be a good thing for both of them.

"By all means," she said cordially. "You can get back?"

Once more Corinne consulted the time-table.

"Yes. But I shall be a little late, I expect. Does it matter, Ariadne? The local trains are awful. I shouldn't get to the house until nearly midnight."

Ariadne laughed.

"It doesn't sound dreadfully late, does it? I don't expect that I shall get back until fairly late myself. I'll wait up for you."

Thus it was arranged. Corinne rang up the hotel on the telephone in the boudoir, ordered her car, and was downstairs the next morning by eight o'clock.

The economy of the Villa Laure becomes here a matter of importance. Denise Bochon, the wife of the lodge-keeper, was in the habit of arriving at the villa at half-past six in the morning. She let herself in with her key, lighted a fire and made the coffee, and soon after seven took it up with some *brioches* to the young ladies. She then went about her duties in the house, took in the letters, and left the ladies to prepare their own baths and get

themselves up. This she did on the morning when John Strickland left Paris by the day express. Corinne got up at once, ate her early breakfast as she dressed, knocked on Ariadne's door, and cried: "I am off," listened to a very sleepy reply of "Good hunting!" and went downstairs. In the drawing-room, upon a table in one of the great windows which looked out upon the Rhône the letters were laid in a little heap. The only address which the girls had left behind them was that of an office of Lord Culalla's in the City of London, and all their letters were redirected from that office. But on the top of them lay a telegram.

Corinne pounced upon it. There's nothing so intriguing as a telegram when you are clean out of the world. Corinne did not even think of reading to which of them it was addressed. It was just the flimsy piece of blue paper folded over and fastened at the back with a smear of gum. She inserted a finger and flicked it open. She read Strickland's telegram:

> *Please move with Corinne on receipt of this telegram to the hotel at Avignon. Most serious and urgent. Wait there until I come.*

Corinne dropped into a chair. She felt sick and faint. No precautions, however tiresome, were of any use then! The words of the telegram needed no interpreter. Archie Clutter and his friend Roussencq had slipped into France, were after her, had some inkling certainly of where she was, may even have in their possession her actual address. A sense of utter despair stole over her. The police? Archie Clutter beat them at every turn. John Strickland? He could send a telegram. She saw herself continually in flight, just a day ahead of her pursuers, and always in terror, her whole body one sensitive nerve throbbing with it, her face day by day more haggard, her eyes more haunted. Almost she gave up, but in the moment of yielding she felt the great hand close over her mouth, and

the morning went black before her, and the blood in her veins turned to ice.

She sprang up. She must rouse Ariadne at once, and she took a step quickly towards the door. But before she had traversed that long drawing-room her feet were dragging; and at the door she stopped and came slowly back. Even if they moved into the hotel in the town, would they be safe there? Was it not one more stage in the chase, and nothing beyond! Somewhere Clutter would catch her up. What was it he was going to say? "Corinne, the moment has come to be brave." She saw him towering above her, his hand reaching out towards her face, an elemental, a colossal thing of evil . . . unless she could buy him off.

Corinne was looking her very prettiest when she came down into the drawing-room that morning. Her face was fresh, her brown eyes clear. She was wearing a coat and skirt of cream-coloured kasha with a thin stripe of blue, a jumper of stockinette to match, a little bright blue hat, and stockings and shoes of the palest biscuit colour. No stranger but must have accounted her a girl daintily nurtured and tended, of a gay spirit and delicate, gracious thoughts. But a look came into her face now which not even her maid had ever seen, so careful was she of the figure she presented to the world. Her frank brown eyes became secret and cunning. She looked askance; and a sly grin disfigured her mouth. A witch had waved a wand over her, transforming her into a creature quite sinister, and emphasising her essential ugliness by leaving her decked out in her pretty apparel. Hag-ridden by terror, Corinne herself was becoming terrible.

"It's Ariadne they want really," her thoughts ran. "She means money. They would arrange to keep her somewhere in Marseilles. Just for a day or two, whilst they got into touch with Strickland. They wouldn't harm her here. They wouldn't want to bring the police on them in France. If Strickland promises to hold his tongue,

they'll bring Ariadne to him, when he pays. They mean to kill me. But if they got their money, they'll leave me alone."

Corinne looked at the clock as she heard the car roll up to the front door. It was still five minutes to eight. She smoothed out the blue telegram and folded it in its original shape, and placed it in her wrist-bag. She ran quickly and lightly upstairs and put a few things for the night into a small bag. She could always say afterwards that she had not been certain whether she would come back that night. She called through the door to Ariadne: "I shall catch the last train." She passed into the boudoir where she and Ariadne had spent the evening. The railway time-table was still lying upon the couch, and she opened it and verified her memory of the trains between Avignon and Marseilles. Then she ran downstairs again with her bag in her hand and went out by the drawing-room window on to the terrace, and so round to the front.

"In case I miss my train back this evening," she said with a bright smile to the chauffeur as he took her bag from her and placed it in the car. "The station, please!"

The big iron gates which gave entrance from the road into the park stood wide open for the day. That, indeed, was the necessary custom of the Villa Laure whilst Ariadne and Corinne camped out in it. Pierre Bochon was at work, except during the midday, either in the garden or lending a hand in the house. Denise Bochon, his wife, was cook, housekeeper, parlour-maid and housemaid rolled into one, as few but French servants could be. There was therefore no one on duty at the lodge at all throughout the day. The gates would not be closed until half-past eight or so, when Denise Bochon and her husband, having like frugal people taken their dinner in the house, retired for the night to the lodge. Corinne, as she stood with that sly look upon her face, had been reckoning upon those open, unwatched gates. "Ariadne!" she said to herself with a cold little shrug of the shoulders

as the car passed between the gates into the road. She thought of her practising her songs. "After all, an amateur."

Corinne applauded herself for her wisdom when the train arrived at Marseilles. For she saw from the window of her carriage a big man and a little man, each one, from his Homburg hat to his brown shoes, an obvious tourist, and each one carrying a suit-case, which was neither battered nor new, descend from a first-class carriage ahead of hers. She took good care that a good many other passengers should intervene between herself and these two ill-assorted tourists, but she kept them in view. She saw that they parted company as they approached the gates where the tickets were collected, the little man going first—the jungle-cat in a word preceding the tiger. Both, however, passed through without question and were lost to her in the great ante-room of the station. She might have cried out, of course: "There are two escaped convicts. Arrest them!" But she was not of the stuff for such heroic measures. People would have thought her mad and the men would have been clear before any attention was given to her outcries. The sight even of the back of Archie Clutter shook her and turned her bones to water, so that she must sit down upon a bench and rest there with the station heaving up and down before her eyes. Clutter and his friend had come right through to Marseilles. They would have their preparations to make—as she had reasoned out in the drawing-room. They had the whole day in front of them. They would need to be quick, too. The one day would suffice for them, and there were trains enough to take them back to Avignon. For herself, she had a fairly busy day ahead of her, too. But she did not leave the station. She booked a room, deposited her bag in the Terminus Hotel and, taking another ticket, doubled back to Nîmes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: *And a Third—Ariadne's*

ARIADNE FERNE set out upon her excursion at a later hour. Pierre Bochon added to his multifarious duties that of cleaning her small car, and he had it ready in the little garage at the side of the house by ten o'clock. It was at about that hour that Ariadne descended from her room. She glanced at the few letters waiting for her on the table in the window. But the envelopes had not an interesting appearance and she slipped them all unopened inside the vellum cover of one of those large illustrated volumes which make so fine an appearance on a drawing-room table. She called along the corridor to Denise:

"You can leave me a cold supper in this room. Then you won't be kept here in the evening, Denise, and I shan't be tied to a dinner hour."

She drove off into the high country with an exhilaration and a sense of lightness which she had not known for a long while. She was glad to be alone, but it was not the mere absence of Corinne which was the secret of her good spirits. She could have discovered that easily enough if she had wished. The mystery of a singing heart is never very profound for the happy person who is blessed with it. But Ariadne was resolute not to pursue any such inquiry. She permitted herself, however, to take a careful note of the road on which she was travelling into the uplands, on the supposition that she might perhaps come that way again in a few days' time and not alone.

She got back to the Villa Laure, as darkness was closing in, and found the great iron gates of the park already shut. Pierre Bochon came out from his lodge and unlocked them for her at the first summons of her horn.

"I am afraid, Pierre, that we must keep you up to-night," she said with the enchanting smile which made a gift out of an injury. "Mademoiselle Corinne does not reach Avignon until midnight."

Pierre Bochon was very willing to sit up for these ladies. They were mad, of course, like the rest of their nation, and their ways incalculable, but their madness was pleasant and gay. Ariadne drove along the half-mile of avenue and open pasture to the house, left the car in the garage, and walked round the house to the back where the chief rooms opened on to a broad terrace. Denise Bochon locked and bolted the front door before she left in the evening for the lodge, and, indeed, it might have been left locked and bolted throughout the day for all the use the two girls made of it. Ariadne stood for a few moments on the terrace. A flight of steps led down to a small bridge thrown across a sunk fence on to the pasture ground which sloped slowly down to the Rhône.

Ariadne watched the coulours of the swift, broad river change from purple and orange and sparkles of gold to a cold grey as the last of the daylight waned. Strickland, in the house at Kew, had consoled himself with the picture of a summer night, which was hardly ever more than dusk —just the dusk of evening shading through the silver of moonlight to the dawn. But he had forgotten in what a hurry eight hundred miles farther south night puts the earth to bed.

Darkness swooped upon the park and the villa. Stars embroidered it, and the faint beam of a planet shimmered on the river like a fine gold rod on a sheet of black marble. Ariadne with a momentary chill turned away towards the house. It was even now not yet nine o'clock. There were to be three hours of uncompromising night before the moon rose and before Corinne's train drew up at Avignon.

Ariadne opened one of the long windows into the drawing-room, turned on the electric light, ate her cold supper, drank with it a glass of old Burgundy, made herself a

cup of coffee, took a liqueur of Armagnac, lit a cigarette and bethought herself of her letters. She turned back the cover of the big vellum-bound folio, and, to her surprise, discovered, shuffled in amongst them, a small blue telegram. She held it in her hands for a moment, wondering how in the world she had come to overlook it. A letter, if it was in an unknown hand, might be neglected, but a telegram, no. There was a thrill in the mere opening of any telegram. Ariadne turned it over; the folds were stuck together with a smear of gum. She tore it open and read Strickland's message, and the floor seemed to open under her feet. "Most serious and urgent." Not without the soundest of reasons would he so alarm her. And his telegram had lain twelve hours, more than twelve hours, she reasoned, unopened, between the covers of a book.

Ariadne waked from a daze of fear to realise that the lights of the room were blazing through the open door on to the dark terrace—an invitation. She ran to the switch of the electric light at the side of the big double doors in the inner wall and turned it off. The room was in darkness, and she for the moment blinded by the swift transition. She stood by the door until a panel of faint light showed her where the glass door opened on the terrace, and a gleam here and there of polished furniture hinted the disposition of the room. Then, stepping noiselessly, she crossed to the table on which stood the telephone apparatus.

"I must ring up the hotel and ask for help," she said, and though she was unaware of it, she spoke aloud. She removed and replaced the receiver twenty times; she rattled again and again the hook on which it hung, and no answer was returned to her. The line was dead. The line, then, was cut. Archie Clutter and his friend, then, were already in the park, already watching it. Ariadne found herself touching her face and covering her mouth with the palm of her hand—experimenting dreadfully, as she had seen Corinne do in her parlour at the top of the

house in London; and with a little sob she snatched her hand away again.

She felt horribly alone in that isolated house. She had a little revolver, she remembered, but it was in the pocket of her motor-car in the garage, and since the two men were in the park, watching from some hiding-place amongst the trees, she dared not slip out and make a dash for it. For there was Corinne on her way from Marseilles. Corinne had to be thought of, to be thought for. From the first moment when Ariadne recovered from the daze into which the shock of the telegram had plunged her, Corinne had been in the front of her thoughts. But for Corinne, Ariadne would before now have slipped along the terrace, dived into the shrubbery and run the risk of a flight, from tree trunk to tree trunk, until she reached the thickets by the park wall. But she dared not; desertion was not a word in Ariadne's vocabulary. The idea of it did not occur to her. She had not argued out in her mind a policy of inaction. It stood clear at once before her eyes, indisputable, the law graven upon the tables. Thus:

If I were to creep out into the shrubberies, then along the bottom of the sunk fence to the screen of trees on the other, the lodge side of the house, I should have to cross the open park. I might win through—perhaps. I might reach the lodge. But the chances are against me. If I were caught and held prisoner, Corinne would be delivered into their hands. Corinne would drive up in a cab from the station. She would pay the driver and send him off. She would come easily into the house here without a thought of danger, and the trap would close behind her. But if I wait until she comes, with the window open so, I shall be at her side before she dismisses the cab. There will be a man driving it. At a word he will turn and, driving at his highest speed, carry us both out of danger."

Thus she reviewed the position. Of course, if Clutter and his friend invaded the house before, why, then—but

she would not think of it, lest her heart should sicken with fear. She must take that risk. It was to her mind the lesser risk than flight. Those two wild brutes would wait with the patience of brutes until both the victims were safely housed within walls. But there were three hours to live through. She had a thought that even if she lived through them, Strickland would find a white-haired woman when he came to Avignon—perhaps pass her in the street unrecognised.

There was nothing which she could do. . . . Yes, one thing. Ariadne was sitting in a black corner of the room with an oblique view of the open door, and no view at all of the terrace outside. Even now her two enemies might be standing just outside, where she could not see them, though her eyes never left that misty oblong, perfectly silent, perfectly immobile, listening, listening—Ariadne found the mere idea of it unendurable. She flitted across the room to a couch ranged against the back wall, exactly opposite to the window, and sat there staring out into the gloom. The stretch of terrace in front of her was empty.

Ariadne could see very well now. Above the low parapet the sky curved down beautiful with a myriad stars. She could hear the cattle cropping the pasture grass, the hoot of an owl, even the bustle of a bird amongst the leaves of a tree, and very far away the infinitely faint throb and whirr of some belated traveller in his car. But that last sound had no comfort for her ears. It did but add a poignancy to her loneliness and warn her that she was in the sequestered house, without defence or a link to bind her to a friend.

Meanwhile the minutes were passing. She nursed no great illusions on that score. They were passing, as they pass in a sick-room for some one in pain, with intolerable deliberation. You say an hour has passed, and the hands of the clock reply "Ten minutes." Still ten minutes have passed, and one has not died. But the next moment a hand so cold clutched Ariadne's heart that indeed she

was near to it. Above the parapet of the terrace something black showed suddenly. It was raised higher. Something white came into view, the higher part of a face, and there it stayed—oh, for an immeasurable time. Some one whose eyes she could not see was staring straight through the open door—at her. He must see her, he must, she thought. The head never turned, and gave no sign of life. It was like a mask set there to frighten her. A recollection came to her. Corinne had spoken of Clutter's terrifying immobility. This was he, then! Staring at her with the eyes of the beasts which see by night. Then slowly the head vanished.

And Ariadne had not moved. Fear had come to her in her turn, in an unimagined shape. She felt the great hand with its fingers of flexible steel bruise her face. She was bound body and legs and arms by fear; she sat and waited what would befall her.

She had not long to wait. A shadow at the window obscuring the stars and a fraction of a second later the shadow gone and the stars dancing. But the shadow was now in the room—in the same room with her. She could not see it, for half a dozen feet from the window and the opaqueness of moonless night which it let in, the space was black as before creation. Nor could she hear a sound. Yet it seemed to her that her senses were extraordinarily lucid, that she would have seen the merest flicker of a finger and heard the least vibration of the air.

Did she move? Was it the pale brown of her frock making a misty blot against the dark couch on which she sat, which caught the intruder's eyes? She was aware of a swift movement towards her, of a form which stopped over her, a form somehow familiar, of a voice which whispered—"Ariadne! So I find you."

And then her endurance snapped. She giggled like a schoolgirl. The man who heard her had heard nothing so dreadful in all his life. A schoolgirl's giggle with a catch of the breath and a sob in the middle of it. It was the

complete expression of an overwhelming terror. Then she began to speak in a low chiding voice:

"Ariadne, my dear woman, what are you coming to? You see his face on the most singular occasions. It is altogether unmaidenly"—and she giggled again and suddenly fell back, her hands with the palms upturned limp at her sides, her eyes closed.

The man dropped at her side. "Ariadne," he whispered again, and he tried to set his arm about her shoulders. But something more than her natural strength returned to her. She pushed him away violently, she held him off at arm's length, he could see the wild strange gleam in her eyes as though in a fierce anger she warded off a stranger.

"My dear," he said. "You know me, Ariadne!"

It was he who chided her now, but with such a loving tenderness that the mere sound of his voice brought a little quiet to her distracted mind. The rigid arms relaxed. She looked at him uncomprehendingly, then turned her head away and shook it in dissent, and so turned back to him.

"You? John Strickland?" she asked, pushing her head forward so that her eyes might make sure. She raised her hand tentatively and laid it against his cheek. Then she uttered a sigh and he caught her close within his arms.

"You! You! John Strickland! I couldn't believe it!" A small hand stole up to his shoulder and patted it, to make still more sure that it was no phantom born of her sore need which embraced and deluded her. "I thought that I had raised a ghost of you, because I wanted you so much," and some recollection of the words she had spoken in that moment of delirium came to her. With a little gasp she pressed her face against his coat. A gust of laughter shook her. "I gave myself away when you stooped over me, didn't I, John Strickland?" she said in a stifled voice. "Will you turn me down, too, for a hussy?"

"I will not," he replied, and the laughter died away in

her throat and she fell to shivering, but shivering in a convulsion of her nerves, whilst little bubbles of sound broke from her lips uncontrollably. She might have been sitting upon some high ice-slope of the Alps waiting for the day to break.

"But you are safe, my dear," he pleaded with her.

"I know. It's all that eternity of waiting alone here in the dark, before you came, knowing those two men were outside in the park."

She flung her arm over his shoulder and held him close, so that he could feel the heaving of her breast and the beat of her heart against his body.

"Why did you wait?"

"I had to wait. There's Corinne."

"But I sent you a telegram."

"I only found it this evening. It wasn't your fault, my dear. It was mine. The telegram came in time. But it was pushed amongst the letters. Neither Corinne nor I noticed it."

She told him of her failure that evening to connect with the hotel; of the choice she had to make between the two risks—that of capture in the park or of capture in the house.

"I was terrified out of my wits. You only telegraphed that you were coming, not when you would come. I knew that there were plenty of grim slums in Marseilles where they could keep me for a year and no one would be the wiser. But I couldn't make a dash for safety and leave Corinne for them, could I? Not to be thought of, Strickland. I had to wait, even if I died of fear."

She made in her turn her inquiries of him.

"It's wonderful that you should have come just when I needed you more than anything in the world. How did it happen?" she asked in a voice of wonder; and she nestled in the hollow of his arm like a child asking for a fairy-tale.

"It happened, I suppose," he replied, "because God

didn't want us to rewrite the Scriptures and say: 'The wages of loyalty is death.' It must have happened."

He told her of his journey. He had reached Avignon at half-past eight and had a qualm of disappointment because she was not at the barrier. "I explained to myself that you had taken my message very literally and were actually waiting in the hotel."

But at the hotel they were not to be found, and no rooms had been reserved for them. Then, for the first time throughout that journey, Strickland had lost his confidence. He tried to telephone to the Villa Laure from the hotel, and when he failed he was seized with panic. He borrowed a small car from the manager of the hotel and drove himself out to the Villa. At the gate the Bochon family would not let him in.

"They were right, of course. I give them full marks for their fidelity. Even that international passport, a ten-pound Bank of England note, wouldn't persuade them. But it was maddening. They had received no instructions from the house that a visitor was expected. They didn't believe a word of what I was saying. Ariadne, it was appalling. There were those two faithful people holding me up, and God only knew what might at that actual moment be happening to you half a mile away."

He gripped her closer to him in a spasm of terror. In mind, he was still standing outside the gate, arguing, persuading, bribing.

"They were certain I was there for no good. Madame Bochon did her share of the talking from her bed inside the lodge. I was to come back to-morrow morning, and then 'we'll have a look at you and see whether we'll let you in, my cabbage,' and at each sentence she told the man Bochon to send me away and come into the lodge because she was feeling a *courant d'air*."

Ariadne laughed in a happy forgetfulness of her environment. She saw Denise Bochon in a feather bed with a great puffed quilt over her, probably a night-cap

on her head, complaining of the draught. Strickland had turned away from the gate, sidled into the driver's seat behind the wheel and driven the car along the park wall until his headlights had shown him a great pole clamped to the stone. He had stopped his car by this pole and climbed thence on to the top of the wall. He had dropped into a great bed of last year's leaves in the midst of some trees and, creeping out from amongst them, had felt something whip round his leg and sting him. An adder? But the coil was still about his ankles. A trap? But there was no bite of iron teeth. He stooped and unwound a loose end of thick wire.

"The telephone wire," Ariadne exclaimed in a low voice. "Then it's true. They are in the park waiting." She lifted her head, her eyes shining like quiet stars in the gloom. "John, did they see you?"

Strickland shook his head.

"I kept to the trees, when I could. There's a screen of them on the left there. From the fringe of that screen I could see all these windows obliquely. Not a light was showing. It seemed to me a house that dreamed; a shrine of deep peace. There was nothing to be afraid of. So intense a relief soothed me that I fancied that all the prayers I had ever uttered since I was a boy were now answered in one splendid benediction. You and Corinne were asleep in that first-floor suite of yours. Very possibly my telegram had gone astray. Very possibly the telephone wire had snapped of its own accord. I had but to stand sentry till the morning in the shadows of those trees."

But some irrelevant thought of Madame Bochon and her *courant d'air* had arisen to disturb him. Why, he wondered, should he be thinking of the woman at the Lodge? With a shock the answer came. Of all that range of windows upon the first story, the windows of the owners' suite, not one was open, on this hot summer night. Perfect for Madame Bochon, intolerable to Ariadne, and

no doubt to Corinne as well. At once the alarm-bells began to ring once more in his brain. He climbed down into the ditch which ran from the screen of trees below the terrace to the shrubberies on the opposite side of the house. Halfway across he climbed up to the terrace parapet and, looking over it, had been mystified by the black void of the open window.

"I saw something pale at the end of this room."

"My frock," said Ariadne. "You were looking straight at me. I thought you were one of that pair. I made myself small. But you watched me for hours and hours—oh!" and she shivered and pressed closer to him.

He had dropped down again into the ditch, and running along with his body bent until he had reached the shrubberies, he had climbed on to the terrace and rubbing against the house wall had crept to the open window.

"I listened at the side of it; I could hear nothing. I am armed. I kept my hand in my jacket pocket on the butt of the pistol, and I slipped over the threshold into the shadow of the room."

"You stood in the shadow for a century," Ariadne said, dragging upon the words so that he heard in them all the anguish which she had endured as she sat so still making herself small upon the couch, and all the fine courage which had enabled her to endure it.

"You wonder!" he whispered. He raised her face. He saw her great eyes gleaming softly and seriously, her lips parted, her pale face mysterious and tender. "Ariadne!" He bent his head and kissed her mouth and her hands clasped themselves about his neck.

"Do you know why I stood so still, beloved?"

"No! Tell me!"

"I was repeating one by one the sensations which had enthralled me during that night in the jungle behind Mogok. It was, I don't know why, a shock to me to realise it. So different were the circumstances, yet so precise was the actual repetition. I passed through the

same emotional crisis. I heard the darkness throb about me with the regular beat of a ship at sea, and tiny voices whispering inaudible threats in my ears, and I was aware all the time that there was no real sound at all. I had the same abnormal acuteness of my senses. I knew there was some one in the room—the same tremendous expectancy."

His voice died away, and they sat for a while in silence, she pressed against him and cradled within the hollow of his arm.

"We shall wait here then till Corinne comes?" she asked at length.

"I think so. It was your plan, and the best. If we run for the Lodge a shot might put you in their hands." She clutched him close at the thought of it. "We are better off here. Besides—I have that terrific expectancy still. That open window opposite to us is to me just that gap in the jungle with the white stump. I shall see him there—my tiger—and this time I shall not let him go."

He spoke quite without arrogance and quite, too, without hesitation. He was fortified in a manner outside his experience by the enchantment of this girl who lay in his arms so mysteriously still. He had all at once an enormous pride in himself and a good deal of disdain and pity for his less fortunate fellowmen. Her grace and her loveliness and her brave, joyous spirit were, after all, to walk the world side by side with him for the rest of life—if he could keep her safe through the gloom of this one night. The something exquisite which was the mark of her physically, of her slender body, her length of limb and the turn of her wrists and ankles, which shone no less noticeably in the delicate reticence of her mind, must be preserved for its fulfilment—or he himself failed altogether, failed as man. He kept his eyes upon the window. From time to time he loosed his hold of her and dropped a hand into the side pocket of his jacket to make sure that his automatic pistol needed only the release of

its safety catch to defend this wondrous treasure which had floated to his feet.

After a little while, even at that time "under death's spread hand," they began, as lovers will, to trace back the wonderful hour when the barriers had gone down, and heart beat at last against heart, to its first origin. Was it then? Was it this or that thing I did? This sudden glance of understanding? That revelation of a thought in common?

"The morning when you came to me with your ruby, Strickland," said Ariadne, "I hurt you horribly, through my stupidity. I was ashamed of myself afterwards, terribly ashamed, and sorry, too. But was I more than merely sorry? More than merely ashamed at my want of insight? I don't know. I don't think so. But there was another morning when I wanted to drive with you to the sea—oh, how I wanted it. Fairyland with all the colours of the dawn. Oh, then—yes, my dear—I ached for that drive down through the green of the south country on a silent road—with you. I couldn't hide my longing from myself. To tell the truth," and she broke into a low full-throated laugh of happiness, "I didn't try very hard."

"You did try, Ariadne. For later on that morning we were both as awkward and constrained as if we hated one another and were doing our very best to be polite."

"Yes, that was a difficult day," she agreed, and then she laughed again. "Oh, John Strickland, if Julian hadn't found out that I was a misfit and sent me back to the shop, we should have had to behave very badly. You don't mind a misfit, do you, so long as it fits you?"

"Ariadne, I put you amongst the stars."

Ariadne drew herself up rather abruptly. The tone of her voice changed.

"Yes—now—talking of stars——"

Strickland, in his turn, laughed.

"I shall occupy the best box on the first night."

Ariadne's arms crept round his neck and drew down his head until their lips met and clung. They were swept out of that dark room on a wave of passion to the sunlit beaches of lovers' dreams. Their voices, which had never risen above a whisper, ceased altogether.

Ariadne, looking out through the window, saw that the stars had changed. Those constellations which she had seen low above the trees of the far bank of the river were now clinging high towards the centre of the heavens.

"It must be near to midnight," she murmured.

"Not yet, beloved," and as he spoke she felt his shoulders stiffen. He leaned forward and so remained. She could see the thrust of his head; she imagined the tension of his attitude. She did a small thing which he recognised at once as the true proof of her. She drew away from him without a word so that he might have the full freedom of his arms. But no one moved outside upon the terrace.

"I can see no one," she breathed.

"Nor I," he answered in the same tone. "But I heard."

"What?"

"Some one move."

Ariadne shuddered. It was one swift spasm of terror, and mastered in the fraction of a second.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as that we are sitting side by side;" and suddenly the barrel of his pistol gleamed darkly in his hand.

The lovers were back in the dark room again, waiting for their enemy. They had made their expedition up to the high lands of the troubadours and come back again, though in a shorter time than it had taken Ariadne to drive up to Les Baux and return. They listened, straining their ears. Neither of them whispered a word or stirred a limb—until the sound was made again. This time both of them heard it, slight and secret though it was. A man very near at hand was treading with a light and stealthy

foot. As Ariadne's mind seized upon the meaning of that sound and located it, a new and unimagined horror shook her soul. For those light footsteps sounded overhead.

"John," she whispered, catching her breath, "did you hear?"

"Yes."

"They are not outside in the park. They are in this house!"

"Yes."

"They have been upstairs there all the evening, whilst I sat here alone!"

"Yes."

He answered her in the most commonplace of tones, the more surely to steady her. He asked:

"Who sleeps overhead?"

"I do."

Ariadne's heart fainted within her breast. They were waiting, hidden, in that private set of rooms until she and Corinne should go upstairs and lock the door which shut them off from the rest of the house. If she had gone up to her room on her return, instead of washing in the cloak-room on the ground floor . . . ! She shivered as she imagined the giant figure of Clutter outlined behind a curtain and suddenly seen, suddenly known for what it was.

Strickland's head turned swiftly. The big mahogany double doors which led from the room into the hall were set in the same back wall against which they were sitting. It was towards those doors that Strickland's head was turned. In spite of the darkness the panels glistened faintly. He leaned back towards Ariadne, never removing his eyes from the dimly-shining doors.

"They are on the stairs. It must be later than we thought. At midnight the moon rises. They can wait no longer."

Indeed it was growing lighter in the room, and outside the window the stars were paling, the sky fading to the

colour of an opal. He lifted her up as outside the doors the stairs creaked badly.

"Yes, they are tired of waiting."

Ariadne's courage did not fail her. The moment to be brave, to quote Archie Clutter's choice phrase, had struck for her.

"Like me, my dear," she whispered, and her lips smiled. But Strickland was remembering with what speed and what noiselessness Clutter could move. He whispered:

"Down on the floor at the head of the couch."

Ariadne sank on her knees silently and crouched under the shelter of the couch, between it and the side wall in a corner. Her light-coloured dress might reveal her to any one entering by the window, but she was completely hidden from the door. Strickland himself moved nearer to the doors out of the range of that twilight which was now pouring from the terrace into the room. For both of them time and the world stood still. Then, without a warning of any kind, the great doors flew open and with noiseless little steps Archie Clutter tripped like a ballet dancer into the room. It was to Ariadne, crouched in her corner, the most bizarre and terrifying thing of all the things which had happened to her. This colossal figure of a man, with murder and revenge and violence in his thoughts, tripping daintily and with amazing swiftness on the tips of his toes. He was making for the window, to shut off all possibility of escape—and that was his undoing. For he reached it and turned with his arms outspread. His huge bulk was outlined against the grey light.

"My lady," he said, bowing and mumming to Ariadne in her corner, "two gentlemen from Cayenne desire your better acquaintance."

A streak of fire split the darkness, an explosion like the roar of a ship's big gun filled the room with a deafening noise. Ariadne's eyes were fixed upon Archie Clutter. The bullet had missed him, then. For he stood

in the window like a man thinking deeply on some unexpected occurrence.

"What will he do?" Ariadne asked herself, clasping her hands together in a panic, and Archie Clutter answered her. He pitched forward with a crash and lay in a mountainous crumpled heap upon the floor.

Ariadne took her cue from her lover. She did not move from her shelter, because he still stood erect against the wall, the muzzle of his pistol pointing at Clutter's body. The jungle knows a thousand tricks. But Archie Clutter never stirred, and in the terrific silence which followed upon the explosion of the pistol, Strickland heard some one else breathing hard in the doorway of the room. A little man advanced, turning his head to this side and that. He saw his big friend prone upon the floor.

"Oh!" he cried in a gasp, and ran forward.

Strickland's voice rang out authoritative and clear on a note of command which took Ariadne by storm.

"Roussencq, *en haut les pattes!*"

Roussencq turned in a flash. Some bright thing shone in his hand, but he never raised the hand. Strickland's pistol talked again. The bright thing dropped and rang on the floor like iron. Hospel Roussencq uttered a scream and, clutching his right arm with his left hand, he leapt over Clutter's body and vanished through the window.

"We shall find him later. He'll do no more harm," said Strickland. "Where do I turn on the light?"

He received no answer and he looked towards the couch.

"Ariadne!" he cried in a voice in which fear struggled with reproach. "Where? Tell me!"

And since again he got no answer, he felt frantically up and down the wall until he found the switch. He turned it down and the room was flooded with light. He ran to the corner where Ariadne had crouched. She

was lying now much as Clutter was lying, in a fumbled heap upon the floor.

"My dear!" he said. "Oh, forgive me!"

He gathered her up in his arms and laid her upon the couch. She was breathing, and such a relief swept over him as he had never known.

"I'll make up to you, beloved, for this night," he said softly. He picked up the revolver which Hospel Roussencq had dropped and slipped it into his pocket, and snatching up a cover from a table he spread it over the dead body of Archie Clutter. Then he chanced to look at the clock. It was close upon one of the morning. It seemed that Corinne had missed her train.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: *The Telegram*

"WHAT you want, my dear, is a glass of champagne. I do, too," said Strickland. "Culalla is certain to have got a stock somewhere. Otherwise he couldn't set us any examination papers. No champagne, no answers to conundrums!"

He had carried Ariadne into the dining-room and turned on all the lights. She was sitting up now in an arm-chair, a wan and deeply-shaken girl. There was a disconsolate look in the abandonment of her attitude which Strickland thought to exorcise by jesting words and a deal of bustling about. He discovered some bottles of champagne in the wine drawer of the side-board, and opening one of them filled up a couple of glasses. Ariadne drank and a little colour returned to her face. Strickland filled the glasses again.

"No!" Ariadne protested.

"Yes. Two glasses each are the minimum. The first does us good. The second gives us pleasure. Drink it and I'll drive you along to the lodge. I would like to get you out of this villa."

The girl looked at him gratefully and with a trembling glimmer of a smile upon her lips. For he understood without a hint the horror of that house of death which kept her heart shuddering within her. He helped her to her feet, led her out by the front door to the little garage, put a coat about her shoulders which he found hanging there on a nail, and drove her through the park. The Bochon family made some tea, and Ariadne went fast asleep upon a couch under one of madame's enormous eiderdowns to protect her from a *courant d'air* which would have been extremely *malsain*. In that same room

Strickland wrote out in his best French the story of that night, and as soon as it was light went in search of the small car he had borrowed the night before. He drove into the prefecture, and a sleepy commissaire of police who had been roused from his bed grew wider and wider awake as he read the report.

"We had a message late last night about those two rascals," he said when he had finished. "I will go at once to Monsieur Dauguignon, our examining magistrate, and we will afterwards drive out together to the Villa Laure. Meanwhile you will take your coffee here."

By eight o'clock the examining magistrate, a tall, thin, dry man, the commissaire, the police surgeon, Strickland, and a posse of police were at the lodge.

"Mademoiselle," said Monsieur Dauguignon to Ariadne, "I shall spare you as much as I can. For it is easy to see, by looking at you, through how great an ordeal you have passed."

It was also easy to see, Strickland reflected, that Monsieur Dauguignon was a bachelor. Else he must have known that that particular expression of sympathy was certain to be received with marked coldness; as, indeed, it was.

"But it is of course necessary that you should come back to the house with us."

"I am ready," said Ariadne.

The commissary selected three of his police to search the park for Hospel Roussencq and made a parcel of the two pistols which Strickland had left in the lodge.

"The second young lady, Mademoiselle Corinne, if she returns from Marseilles before we have finished, she can wait here for us," said the magistrate to Madame Bochon. "Now, let us go!"

They entered the Villa by the front door which Strickland had left wide open, and in the hall, Monsieur Dauguignon turned with politeness to Ariadne.

"Mademoiselle, I shall not ask you to come into the

room where you spent so many unhappy hours last night. Colonel Strickland will be sufficient. But afterwards, when we have finished there, you will guide us to your room upstairs where these rogues were waiting."

"Certainly, monsieur," said Ariadne, and a little stiffly. For the allusion to her worn appearance still rankled. But Monsieur Dauguignon was to put that celibate foot of his still deeper.

"And you will wait for us. It is obvious, of course, that mademoiselle should wish at the earliest moment to repair the disarray of her costume, which no doubt yesterday was most charming. But I must beg of you to wait."

Certainly Monsieur Dauguignon was a bachelor. Ariadne's knowledge of the French language was happily limited. Irony and sarcasm were not within her competence. She would have liked to have said the bitterest things, but, alas! she could only feebly splutter; and that sign of her indignation had no effect. For the whole party, Monsieur Dauguignon at its head, had passed into the drawing-room and closed the door behind it.

Ariadne set to work making up cold and biting rejoinders, such as—very politely—"I know, Monsieur le juge, I look like a dirty old bag of rags, but is it usual for gentlemen in France to tell women so?" or—sweetly—"I have no doubt that I am as revolting as you say, but only a man milliner should have noticed it."

In the invention of these crushing replies she passed the time quickly enough until the party emerged from the room.

"Now, mademoiselle, that unpleasant business is ended. Will you show us the way to your room?"

Ariadne bowed in a stately fashion and walked upstairs. On the first landing a door confronted them, the front door, as it were, of the suite. Inside there was a tiny hall from which other doors led off. Ariadne opened one of them upon her right.

"This is my room."

It was a fine, high room, with windows upon the river and walls hung with silk. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed but Ariadne's dressing-case, which stood open upon a table with a few emptied jewel-cases scattered about it.

"You had valuable jewellery, mademoiselle?"

Ariadne laughed.

"I have one stone of great value, monsieur, but I have been for a little while in the habit of wearing it always."

She drew out from the bosom of her dress a great ruby glowing upon a platinum chain; she did not look at Strickland as she showed it, but she flushed very prettily. Monsieur Dauguignon turned to another door.

"And this leads . . . ?"

"To my friend's room."

"Ah, the truant's," said the magistrate, and he opened the door. Strickland's eyes were fixed upon the ruby. It was his gift to her, and it had been held against her heart—for a little while, she said—ever since that morning when she had longed for that drive through the greenery of England to the sea, and had stayed for a moment upon the threshold of her house, and then with a little shrug of the shoulders, had gone in. It glowed now in the play of her fingers, it had lain secret in her bosom, it was warm with the warmth of her white skin. She looked at him beneath lowered eyelids and she tightened her hand about the ruby and hid it as something divinely precious in her palm. Dauguignon, who had been looking all this while into Corinne's bedroom, closed the door and came back to Ariadne.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "this friend of yours—she is Corinne the dancer?"

"Yes."

"And I understand from Colonel Strickland that the fugitive Clutter"—he pronounced the name Cluttaire —"had some grievance against her?"

Ariadne flushed up instantly.

"Yes, but there were no grounds for it," she began hotly to protest, but the magistrate interrupted her.

"You will forgive me, but it is not necessary at this moment to enter upon that matter at all. All I wish to do," and he moved across the room into the window, whither Ariadne, ready for battle on Corinne's behalf, was drawn insensibly after him, "all I wish to do is to establish the fact."

"Clutter certainly imagined that he had been wronged," Ariadne conceded. There was a cushioned seat in the window.

"Let us sit down here for a moment, mademoiselle," Monsieur Dauguignon said gently. Strickland had the impression that in drawing Ariadne across the room, as he had very deliberately done, the magistrate was merely obeying the ancient practice of so disposing his witness that the light should fall full upon her face.

"So," he continued genially when Ariadne had sat down. "There is a little thing which puzzles me. Let us see if we can clear it up."

Ariadne's instinct warned her to suspect the magistrate's geniality. There might be traps in it. She had heard something of the methods by which these examinations were conducted.

"I shall answer any questions, of course, which you wish to put to me, monsieur," she said.

"That is good," and he took his seat in the window facing her. "It is about this telegram from the Colonel here. It came up with the morning's letters, and those letters are placed by Denise Bochon on a table in the drawing-room until you come down, since she is too busy to be running up and down stairs."

Ariadne nodded.

"Now, does Denise Bochon sort those letters?"

"No," Ariadne answered, wondering whither Monsieur was leading her. "Denise leaves them all together in a little heap."

"Exactly. That is what I thought. And the first of you who comes down selects her letters from the heap."

"Yes."

"And Corinne was the first down yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Then it follows, does it not? that Corinne must have seen that telegram addressed to you. She must have made sure that it was not meant for her?"

"I suppose so," Ariadne agreed. She began to see the drift of the magistrate's questions. It is the misfortune and, at the same time, the happiness of loyal people that they are very slow to suspect disloyalty in their friends. Ariadne was merely puzzled when she grasped the point which was troubling Monsieur Dauguignon, but she was very definitely puzzled.

"Would it not have been natural then for Corinne to have run upstairs with that telegram and given it to you?" he continued, and with a shrug of his shoulders, he added indisputably:

"After all, a telegram is a telegram."

Ariadne did not answer.

"If it had been you who had come down first, mademoiselle, you would have done that," he continued, pressing her for a reply.

"I suppose that I should," she answered slowly, and then found the reply which relieved her of a trifle of discomfort. "But Corinne was in a hurry. She had to catch a train."

Monsieur Dauguignon took her up on the instant.

"Ah, but none the less, Corinne, I understand, did run up stairs. She called to you through the door of her bedroom the time of the train by which she was returning."

Ariadne for the moment had forgotten that. Her discomfort was re-awakened in her. But she blamed the magistrate for it rather than Corinne.

"So she did," she answered with her brows drawn together in a frown.

"And she never mentioned that telegram?"

"No."

"That is curious. It is curious, too, that you did not see it, mademoiselle, when you came down."

Ariadne had an explanation to cope sufficiently with that perplexity.

"I was in a hurry, too. I just glanced at the envelopes and shuffled them all together again and tucked them away in the book. No doubt the telegram had got stuck to one of them."

"Yes," said Monsieur Dauguignon a little doubtfully. "Yes."

He looked round the room with an air of a man wanting help of some kind, but his eyes came back very sharply, almost guiltily, to Ariadne when she moved; and he held her by another question, spoken almost in a flurry. His uneasiness must have been apparent to any onlooker. It certainly became at once very significant to Strickland. It suggested to him that, quite apart from the problem of the telegram, there was some other mystery troubling Monsieur Dauguignon and troubling him very much.

"Corinne is a great friend of yours, mademoiselle?" said Dauguignon, and he made a gesture with his hand, which said: "I have not done with you. Please keep your seat!"

"A great friend," Ariadne answered firmly.

"Yes, your great ladies are more democratic than ours, mademoiselle . . . That is known. We are a Republic, you are a democracy. We keep the social grades distinct, perhaps because we are not so sure of ourselves as you . . . Yes, no doubt,"; and again the magistrate's worried eyes swept the room for help.

He was playing for time Strickland realised with amazement. He was waiting upon chance to assist him in some grave predicament. Strickland was suddenly seized with panic. He fancied that there was some new horror lurking for them all, some secret, monstrous and inconceiv-

able, of which only the magistrate was aware. He was clearly quite at the end of his resources when an interruption came. A sergeant of police entered the room and saluted.

"Yes?"

Monsieur Dauguignon turned to him eagerly. Nothing could have been more welcome to him than this diversion.

"We have searched the park, your honour, and we have not found Hospel Roussencq. But there is a place where, with the help of a tree, the wall can be climbed. There is blood upon the wall there and blood upon the road outside."

"For the moment he has escaped then," said Dauguignon, and then his face cleared surprisingly. He had found his way out of his difficulty. He turned back to Ariadne with a smile.

"Mademoiselle, you have, doubtless, in the pocket of your car, one of those fine, big maps of the district. It will be of great help if you will fetch it for me without delay."

Ariadne rose and with her Monsieur Dauguignon. He escorted her to the door and saw her go down the stairs, talking to her all the while with the utmost profusion.

"We shall be able to see which road that bandit Roussencq is likely to have taken, and in what barn he is likely to be hiding——"

He was back in the room a second later, a changed man, keen, quick, transformed into activity.

"Roussencq! Bah! We know very well where to hear news of him. In the little bars round the Grand Theatre at Marseilles. The Rue Corneille, eh, Monsieur le Commissaire? Those little narrow bars with their sanded floors, their mirrors on the walls and their gaudy red panels with the gilt nails. Roussencq! We have him!" He snapped his fingers contemptuously and gave quick orders to the sergeant.

"You will stand outside the front door of this suite, my friend. You will not allow that young lady to come in

again—no, not however prettily she may persuade you. You will pretend to know nothing of that map. You will ask the questions. You understand?"

"Perfectly, your honour."

The sergeant saluted and went out. Monsieur Dauguignon turned to the commissary, the surgeon and Strickland with a face now quite pale and marked with a great gravity.

"Gentlemen," he said simply, "I beg you to prepare yourselves."

He opened the door leading into Corinne's bedroom. The room was in such disorder that a tornado might have wrecked it. Chairs were overset, curtains torn down, with every suggestion of despair and violence.

But none of the four men crowded in the doorway had eyes for that disorder. An exclamation of horror broke from Strickland's mouth. For from the great chandelier of crystal pendants in the middle of the ceiling, Corinne dangled by a cord, with her hands strapped behind her back. Her face was dark and swollen, her eyeballs bursting from her head and her tongue, bitten through in her agony, projected between her teeth. Every trace of her delicate beauty was gone with her life. Strickland himself only recognised her by her figure and her dress.

They cut her down, removed the noose from about her neck and laid her upon the bed.

"Poor creature, whatever wrongs she did, she has paid for them," said the magistrate. He took a linen towel and reverently covered her face.

"Yes, cover her up," said Strickland gently. "She would have hated to know she was going to look like that after her death."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: *Corinne's Last Day*

SIX weeks later John Strickland was summoned for the twelfth time from his hotel to the prefecture.

"I announce to you that I need keep you here no longer," said Monsieur Dauguignon. "This morning Hospel Roussencq died in the prison hospital at Marseilles. So all this terrible affair is at an end."

He closed the cover of the dossier as he spoke and gave it a pat. He smiled at his visitor.

"Of course, there might be a charge made against you, Colonel Strickland, for carrying a pistol, and you are hereby found guilty and condemned to take an *apéritif* with me. But before we go forth to carry out your sentence, there is still a little word which must be said."

He pointed to a chair by the side of his table and Strickland sat down.

"I have now traced Corinne's movements upon that last day of her life. The mystery is solved, and it is not, as you no doubt suspected, a very pretty mystery. Corinne took your famous telegram with her to Marseilles. We cannot doubt it. When she went upstairs and shouted through the door that she would return by the last train, she packed the necessaries for a night away. That, too, we cannot doubt. She certainly travelled to Marseilles. She left her bag in the Terminus Hotel, and engaged a bedroom for the night. She returned to the station and took a return ticket for Nîmes, where she arrived at two forty-eight in the afternoon. At Nîmes, she bought a small black hat of the fashion which hides the eyes, a veil, and a dust-cloak to cover her dress. She returned to the station and again took a return ticket, this time to Pont

d'Avignon. She reached Pont d'Avignon a little after seven. It is the small station at the end of the bridge on the opposite side of the river, and—I beg you to observe this—not more than a kilometre and a half from the Villa Laure. Corinne therefore had ample time for—let us be frank!—her treachery. She made the little changes in her dress and appearance between Nîmes and Pont d'Avignon. Certainly at the latter station no one recognised her. It was not yet dusk. The gates of the park would be open for another hour, or nearly another hour. She went quickly to the house and placed the telegram amongst her friend's letters. And then—ah, and then—she makes the fatal step. She runs upstairs for some little thing which, in the hurry of the morning, she has forgotten—a lipstick, perhaps! Who shall say? She runs upstairs and finds her enemies already hidden in her room."

Strickland nodded his head.

"Clutter and Roussencq must have been hiding in the park throughout the day until they saw their chance and slipped into the house."

"No, sir," Monsieur Dauguignon corrected him. "They came in a hired motor-car from Marseilles during the afternoon. They hid the car in an old unused outhouse not far from where they scaled the wall. They had in the car a wicker-work basket with a padlock. It is not difficult to guess to what purpose that basket was to be put."

"No," said Strickland in a low voice.

The magistrate rose and from a cupboard took his hat and his stick.

"But as for Corinne, it is clear what her intention was. She would have caught the last train to Nîmes. From Nîmes she would have travelled through the early part of the night to Marseilles. First thing the next morning she would have sent a telegram to the Villa Laure saying that she had missed her train from Marseilles and was compelled to spend the night at the Terminus Hotel. It is not a pretty story."

He held open the door with a bow. But Strickland paused upon the threshold.

"I ask a favour of you, monsieur," he said. "I should not like that story to reach my wife."

"A lady of so brave a loyalty has a claim upon our reverence," cried Monsieur Dauguignon, and with a fine flourish of his cane he drew an imaginary line across the threshold. "It shall not be heard outside that frontier."

ROEDEL DRUG

THE END

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